

Anime
House
Presents
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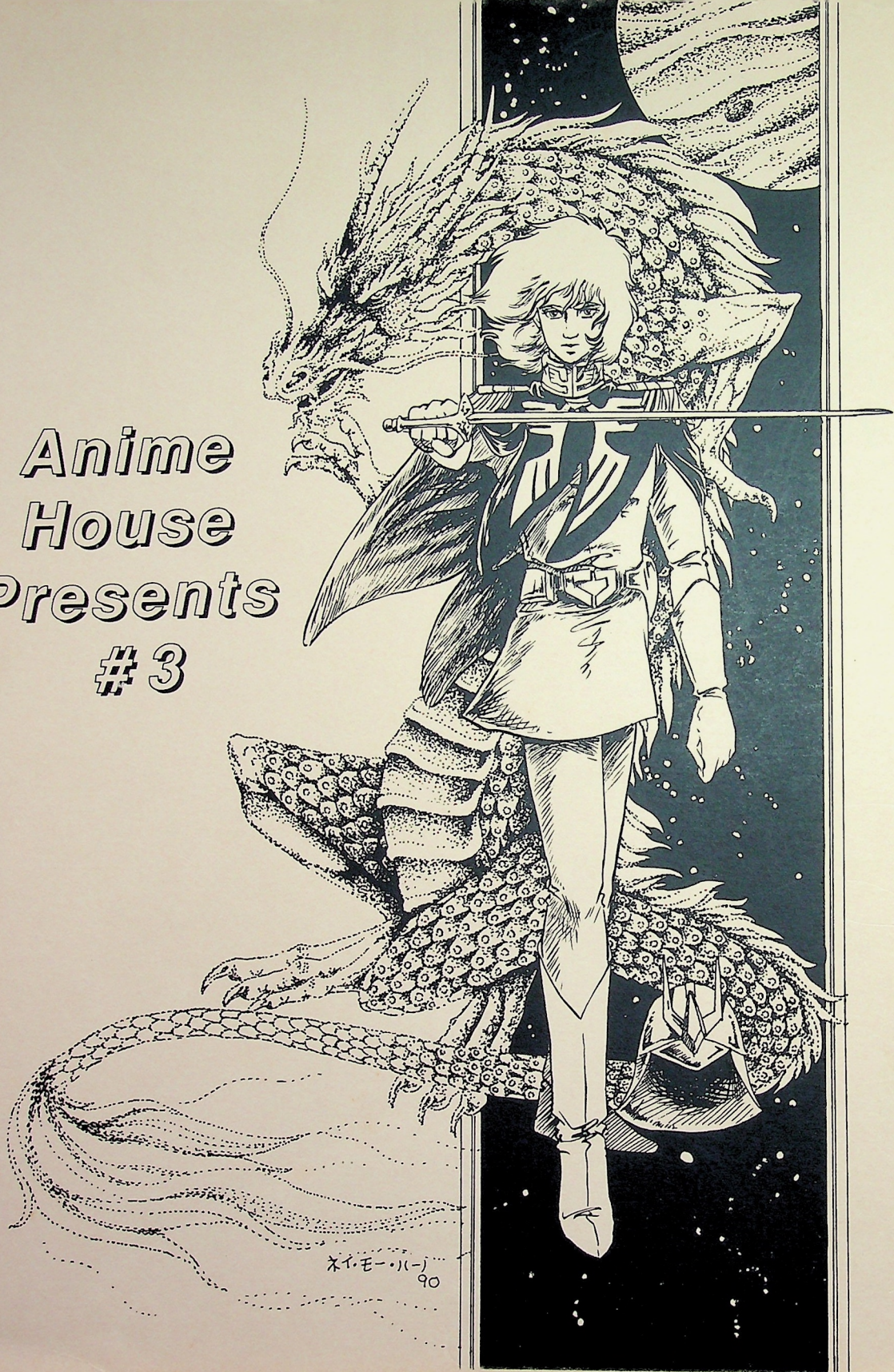


Table of Contents

Hi There.....	2
<u>What Price Dreams?</u> (Mospeada) by Anastasia Papadatos.....	3
- illustrated by Heather Bruton -	
<u>Voltron County, Episode 1</u> by V.M. Wyman.....	22
<u>Thoughts Contingent on a Three-Second Warning</u> (Lupin III) by V.M. Wyman.....	23
- illustrated by V.M. Wyman -	
<u>Voltron County, Episode 2</u> by V.M. Wyman.....	48
<u>Don't Use Your Cosmo in the Kitchen!</u> (Saint Seiya) by Jay Felton.....	49
- illustrated by CyriSSa Adamson -	
<u>Voltron County, Episode 3</u> by V.M. Wyman.....	58
<u>Child of Snow</u> , manga by Heather Bruton.....	59
<u>Forbidden Fruit</u> (Patalliro!) by Steph Rendino.....	68
- illustrated by April Lee -	
<u>Kiss of a Stranger</u> (Dirty Pair) by Michael Bellinger.....	90
- illustrated by Deal Whitley (pencils) & Heather Bruton (inks) -	
<u>Two Blades</u> (Dunbine), poem & art by Heather Bruton.....	124
<u>Dark Thoughts by Candlelight</u> (Samurai Troopers) by Pat Munson-Siter.....	125
- illustrated by Pat Munson-Siter -	
<u>Voltron County, Episode 4&5</u> by V.M. Wyman.....	128
<u>Be Careful of Your Little Boy</u> (Patalliro!) by Barbara Tennison.....	130
- illustrated by Lee Dunning -	
<u>Ashibe Yoho's "Crystal Dragon"</u> , portfolio & commentary by Heather Bruton.....	134
<u>Hunter/Prey</u> (Catseye) by Karen Klinck.....	143
- illustrated by Robert Perchaluk -	
Anime House Wants You (Submissions Guidelines).....	159

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Editors: Anime House (Marg Baskin & Heather Bruton)

Typing & Layouts: Marg Baskin. Many thanks to Mike Bellinger, Anastasia Papadatos and Steph Rendino for typing their own stories.

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This fanzine contains explicit erotica. Age statement required for purchase.

Hi There,

and welcome to the third issue of Anime House Presents, also known as the just-a-little-bit-slightly-jinxed issue. We were determined to get this beast out in time for MediaWestCon 1990, and such resolves can't help but cause the local gremlin populous to develop an interest in making it difficult. But, despite artwork-munching mailboxes, misaddressed packages, and criss-crossed communications, we got it dragged together, and we think it looks rather good. We've added new names to our lists of writers and artists, and rounded up stories in some off-the-beaten path anime universes.

Before I get on to the "thank you"s and suchlike, I'd like to second a point Steph Rendino made in the editorial of Pieces of 88, Act II: The small circle of anime fan-fiction writers is in need of new blood. If you're reading this, it's presumably because you like fan-fiction in general, and anime fan-fiction in specific. If you also like to write it, we'd love to hear from you! We're always trying to shake new authors out of the bushes. So take a look at the stories herein, and our guidelines (at the back of the zine), and don't be shy. Variety is definitely the spice of fanzines.

Our fiction offerings this time range from a downbeat soliloquy from Pat Munson-Siter (Dark Thoughts by Candlelight) to a zany, lighthearted romp from Jay Felton (Don't Use Your Cosmo in the Kitchen) to a long-long-long-overdue tongue-in-cheek comeback to one of fandom's most treasured obsessions from Steph Rendino (Forbidden Fruit). In Thoughts Contingent on a 3-Second Warning, Vicki Wyman provides another glimpse into the mind-set of Goemon Ishikawa, as he walks on the edge of death. Mike Bellinger has entirely too much fun with the rampaging Dirty Pair in Kiss of a Stranger. Anastasia Papadatos and Barb Tennison introduce touches of horror to Mospeada and Patalliro!, in What Price Dreams? and Be Careful of Your Little Boy. Karen Klinck screws up Toshi's day entirely in Hunter/Prey, and Heather speculates on what might happen to Hyoga and Freya after the end of Saint Seiya II in Child of Snow. What more could we ask for? We'd like to thank each and everyone of them for giving us the benefit of their time and talents.

A special tip-of-the-hat to the artists, old and new, who gave us such a wonderful variety of visual images and humor to decorate the words: Vicki Wyman, Cyriisa Adamson, April Lee, Deal Whitley, Pat Munson-Siter, Lee Dunning and Robert Perchaluk.

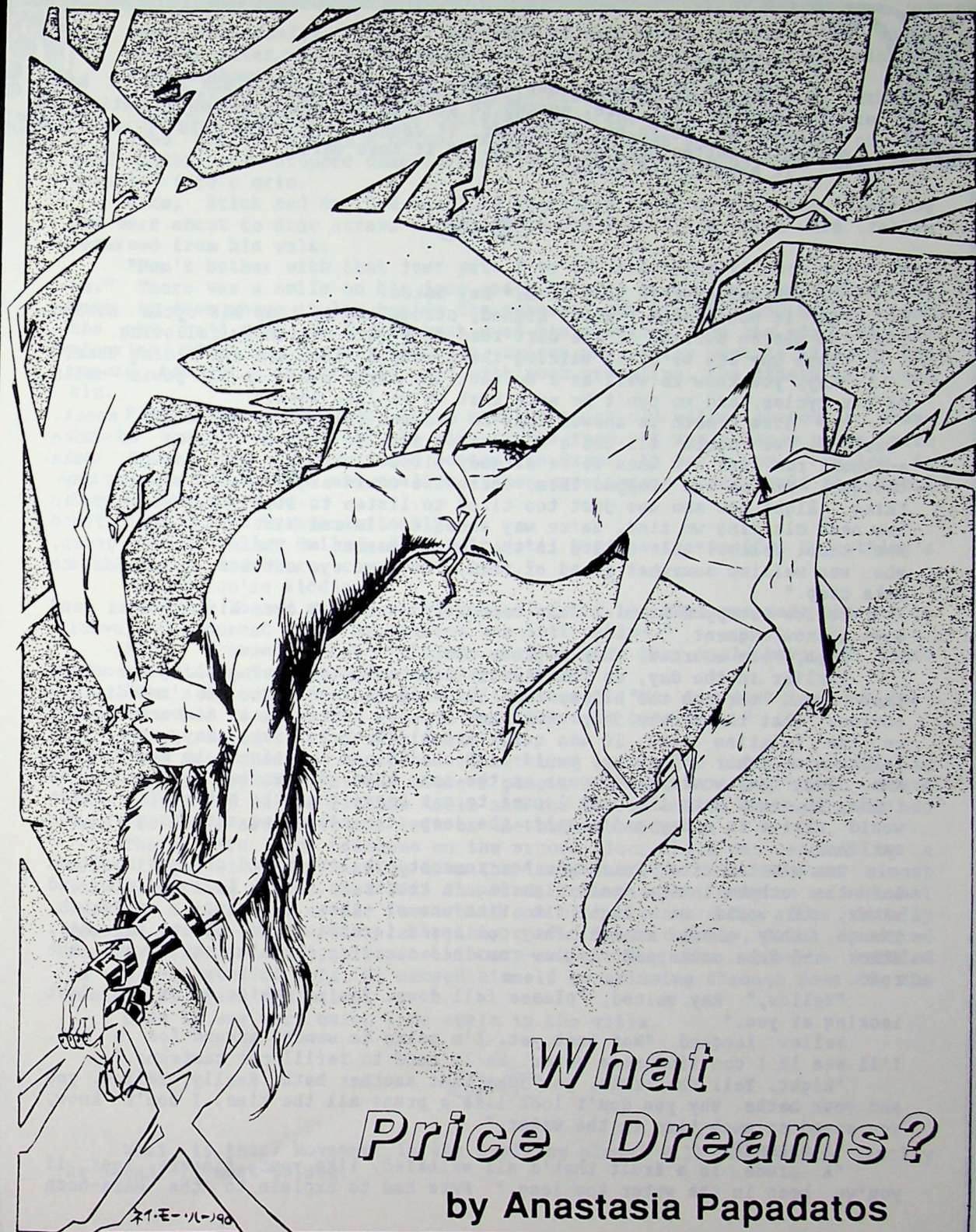
A couple of the stories which were originally scheduled to appear in this issue had to be bumped to Anime House Presents #4, due to time and space constraints. Apologies to Heather and Ron--but don't worry. If all goes well, the next issue will be out in a very few months.

Now, I'll turn you over to the good stuff. We hope you enjoy! And if you do (or don't), please write and tell us. Letters of comment are fun, but they're also an editor's best barometer.

Take care--

Mary Baskin

1990/05/17



What Price Dreams?

by Anastasia Papadatos

It hungers.

Time has no meaning, but surely it must be long since last it has fed. There is life here, enough to sustain but never enough to satisfy. Weakened as it is by its hunger, it cannot even leave this place in search of better hunting grounds. So it must wait.

It hungers and waits.



"Do you think we've lost them?" Ray asked.

"So it would seem." Stick sighed, struggling to keep his cycle moving over the uneven surface of the dirt road they were currently following.

"Then why are we still walking these stupid bikes and not riding them?"

"Ray, you know as well as I do that the Invid can scan the power cells of our cycles, and we can't be sure that we've lost them."

Ray drew breath to answer, but he was cut off before he could speak.

"Besides, we could all use a rest so we shouldn't risk having to make another run for it when we're already tired." Enough was enough, Fuke thought. If no one stopped them, these two could argue about almost anything. Right now she was just too tired to listen to it. "I say we stop in the next clearing we find. We're way ahead of Jim and Mint so we can afford the time. Yellow!" she called to the fourth member of their little group, who was walking somewhat ahead of them, "Keep an eye out for somewhere to make camp."

Yellow stopped humming long enough to look back over his shoulder and wave acknowledgment.

Hmph, Fuke snorted. What a group. Why me?

Earlier in the day, as the six of them had been driving along the road that wound through the hills, the Invid had attacked. It was immediately obvious that the slower jeep could not hope to outrun their airborne enemy on the twisting road. It was quickly decided that Stick, Ray, Fuke and Yellow with their ride armor would lead the fliers away from Jim and Mint in the jeep. They would rendezvous at the next town, Alzavedes. Following the roads, it would take the jeep longer to get there than the bikes. The bikes would arrive in a day and a half; the jeep, the following afternoon at the earliest.

Ten minutes after Fuke made her request, Yellow turned off the road and led the others into a small clearing in the trees. With four people and bikes, it would be a tight fit. With one of them constantly on watch, though, they should manage. They collapsed in exhaustion. That is, Ray, Stick and Fuke collapsed. Yellow remained standing, looking out toward the road.

"Yellow," Ray whined, "please fall down. You're making me tired just looking at you."

Yellow laughed. "Not just yet. I'm going to wander around for a bit. I'll see if I can find some water. We'll need to refill our canteens."

"Right. Tell the truth, you just want another bath. Really, Yellow, you and your baths. Why you don't look like a prune all the time, I don't know, you spend so much time in the water."

"A prune?"

"A prune is a fruit that's all wrinkled, like your fingers look if you've been in the water too long," Fuke had to explain to the Mars-born

man. "Personally, I think he takes so many baths because his voice sounds better when it's bounced off the water. You know, like singing in the shower."

Yellow left the three merrily discussing his love of bathing, singing, and the possible correlation of the two. He returned to the road and set off at a casual pace. Five minutes and two twists of the road later, he stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes wide and his face breaking into a grin.

Fuke, Stick and Ray had unrolled their bed rolls around the clearing and were about to draw straws to see who would take first watch when Yellow returned from his walk.

"Don't bother with that just yet. I've got something to show you. Come on." There was a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. He picked his gear up from where it lay beside the others', got his bike and headed back the way he'd come. He looked back over his shoulder from the edge of the clearing. "Come on. You'll like this, unless you really want to sleep on the ground tonight." Reluctantly, and with much grumbling, the others followed him.

Five minutes later they stood staring at an old villa, obviously abandoned, that stood just off the side of the road. It was a large house with two floors and a wide veranda across its front. It was a pale yellow in color, the paint faded and peeling. Vines grew across nearly half the front face of the building.

"Wow," Fuke breathed finally.

"Yeah." Yellow smiled. "And wait until you see the inside. Everything's still there, furniture, carpets... beds."

"Beds? You're kidding."

"Nope. I looked around inside when I found it. Whatever made the people leave, it happened fast. Everything was left behind."

Stick frowned. "That's strange. You'd think they would have at least come back later to take whatever they wanted."

"Who's to say that they didn't?" Ray asked. "Me, I'm just looking forward to a bed to sleep on. I don't care where it came from."

Stick couldn't argue with that.

They searched the house before settling in. Yellow had been right, in that it was obvious that the house's people had left in a big hurry. There were plates set on the kitchen table and the tub in one of the bathrooms had been filled, a set of towels left on the basin beside it.

There were four bedrooms on the second floor which was reached by a wide flight of stairs leading from the large entrance hall. It was almost like something out of *Gone With The Wind*, Fuke thought, only on a somewhat smaller scale. Each of the four chose one of the rooms and, after finally drawing straws, which Stick lost, they turned in gratefully. Stick wandered for a while and ended up in the library-cum-sitting room, where he settled on an over-stuffed sofa. He amused himself by skimming through some of the books that lined the walls.

Soon it was very quiet once again in the villa.



What is this? Movement in the dwelling place? Will its hunger finally be sated? It must go see.

It finds them about the dwelling, four of them, beings seen as patterns of energy of varying complexity and brightness. Yes. Yes, these are the beings that it feeds best from. These are the beings it has waited so long for.

But look. One of the four glows most brightly. It far outshines the others. By comparison, they are dim. Never has it seen one so strong. Ah! This one it must have. It will feed well and long from this one. Its long wait is over at last.



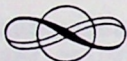
The night passed uneventfully and morning found the four companions seated around the dining room table, eating a light breakfast.

Ray stretched yet again. "Lord, I needed that. I'd forgotten what a real bed felt like, even if I did have to sleep in a sleeping bag instead of under the covers. Wonderful."

"Yes it was, wasn't it?" Fuke sighed. "I feel so much better after such a good sleep."

Yellow stifled a yawn. "I just wish it could have been a longer sleep. I'm still tired."

"You'll wake up once we get moving again." Stick began gathering the supplies, making ready to move on. The others stared after him. Yellow sank his head into his hands. God, how he hated morning people.



They prepare to leave! No! It is too soon. One feeding is not enough. Too, ones like this bright one are rare and it mustn't let this one escape so easily. But what to do?

It can see only one path. It will leave with them. Its strength is returned enough (After one feeding! Indeed the bright one is a marvel!) that it will be able to follow. It must prepare. It will be ready when the time comes.



Late afternoon found the foursome traveling swiftly along a highway, having finally left the dirt road. The countryside had become mountainous around them, but the trees still grew in profusion. It was a hot day, muggy and still. No breeze blew but riding at speed on the cycles created one of its own.

When they came upon a fast moving river, Yellow called a halt. They'd been riding all day with only a short break to grab a bite to eat. Now was as good a time as any to take another, and he'd be able to have that bath he'd hoped for the day before.

As soon as they'd parked the bikes, he grabbed a towel and his soap and made for the water. As he walked along the riverbank, he stifled a yawn.

Damn. Why am I so tired? he thought. I slept well last night. I even

had a wonderful dream. Wish I could remember it, though.

He found a secluded spot and stripped quickly. The water was cold but felt good after the heat of the day. He took his time scrubbing the dirt and sweat from his body and hair, singing quietly to himself the while, sometimes in his woman's voice and sometimes in his own baritone.

This was one pleasure that he guarded jealously. It wasn't the bathing that he really loved, it was the water. Such an abundance of water is what endeared Earth to him. Mars, his beloved home planet, was a closed system colony. They recycled their water and artificially created only limited amounts of new water. There were no rivers or oceans, and rain never fell there. With a smile he remembered his surprise the first time he saw rain. The thunder and lightening had frightened him, but the falling water had thrilled him. Yes, he loved his home world, but he loved Earth as well, and it was Earth that he was fighting for.

Finally he left the water and stood on shore, gazing out at the swift-moving current. He sighed and looked down at his hands. His fingers were wrinkled.

So this is what a prune looks like. I've never seen one. He smiled. Well, I can't go back to the others with fingers that look like prunes. I'll just have to wait here until they get better. And I can catch a quick nap while I'm at it. He stretched the towel out in the warm sun and stretched himself out on it to soak in the welcome heat.



How perfect. How beautiful. It would feed deeply this time. The journey had been draining and it would need much to be able to continue on.



His lover lay warm and soft beside him. She traced lazy kisses down his throat, pausing to nibble his earlobe on the way. She moved round to his chest, to his nipples. He gasped. She moved lower still. Her mouth and hands were skillful. His breathing became ragged, his hands clenched in her hair.

It became too much. He pulled her up beside him and rolled onto her. He played with her breasts with his tongue while his hands explored. She squirmed beneath him. He brought his hands up to either side of her face, kissed her, their tongues meeting and battling in passion.

He deepened the kiss and simultaneously entered her. She cried out and wrapped her arms tightly about him. He set the rhythm, she matched him. All too quickly it was broken. He moved faster, then faster still as she reached peak and screamed her passion, digging her nails into his back. She continued to move with him until at last he peaked as well, trembling and jetting deep within her. He collapsed exhausted into her embrace.





木下・川・ノ

When Yellow opened his eyes, still in the thrall of his dream, the sun was hanging low in the sky. He had been asleep for nearly two hours. It was amazing that none of the others had come looking for him. He made as if to rise, and was surprised to discover how weak he felt. That had been some dream, but he didn't see how it was possible for it to have left him as tired as though it had been the real thing. His hands were actually trembling.

Quickly, he washed once again in the river. The cold water helped some to clear his head. He dressed and gathered his belongings. With a last glance at the river, he went back to where he had left his companions.

Half way back he met Ray coming in search of him. "That must have been some bath! You've been gone a long time. How much dirt could there have been? Let me see your hands! I'll bet they're as wrinkled as all get out."

Ray grabbed at Yellow's hand. The force of his pull threw Yellow off balance. His head might have cleared some, but he was still slightly disoriented. He stumbled into Ray, who stumbled himself. Yellow snatched his hand back. "Don't do that!" he snapped.

Ray's eyes opened wide. What'd he done? "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were so touchy."

Yellow blinked and rubbed at his eyes. "No. I'm sorry, Ray. It's not your fault. I guess I'm just tired still." He held out his hand in apology showing Ray his fingers. "Look, no wrinkles. I've been lying in the sun for the past two hours."

"Two hours? Hey, you should watch that. You could get sick if you're not used to it. Maybe that's why you're tired."

"Could be, but I've done a lot of sun bathing before. I don't see why it would bother me now." Still, it was a plausible explanation, as plausible as any other.

As soon as Ray and Yellow returned, the group left, moving back onto the highway and making good speed for the rest of the night. By midnight they had reached Alzavedes. For so late at night, there were a surprising number of people out and about, so they were quickly pointed to the local hotel. Five minutes later they were settling into their rooms, the three men in one and Fuke in another. They met again in the hall after a while.

"Well, what do we do now?" Fuke asked.

"I say we go out and look around. Jim and Mint won't be here before tomorrow afternoon. We've got plenty of time."

"That's true," Stick said. "I, for one, could use a meal cooked by someone other than one of us. Still, we should try not to draw too much attention to ourselves. We shouldn't be here long enough to get into too much trouble, but you never know." The others nodded their comprehension and agreement. They needed no trouble with the locals.

The man at the desk directed the group to the local eatery, more of a saloon than anything else. Their welcome was warm and heartfelt. Not that many passed through Alzavedes these days. Any new faces were welcomed and pumped for news of the world. The foursome happily obliged, although they carefully edited some of their adventures. It was some hours later that the group headed back for the hotel.

On the way up the stairs, Yellow tripped, banging his ankle painfully. He cursed hotly under his breath. The others stared at him, amazed. They'd never seen him stumble before. Yellow was always so graceful and lithe. Stick took a close look at his face.

"Yellow, are you feeling well? You don't look very good. Your face is awfully red."

Yellow lost his temper, snapped back, "Thanks. You're no beauty yourself." He stomped off down the hall and into their room. He left his friends dumfounded behind him.

Later, as he lay in bed, tired but not asleep, he knew that he'd lost it for a moment there. If only he didn't feel so wretchedly tired. He was losing all coordination now. If this kept up, he'd have to confess to the others that he was sick. They'd have to stop and wait for him to get better or move on without him. He didn't like either choice. He'd just have to try to fight this off. He rolled over and pulled the blankets up to his neck, curling onto his side.

From across the room, Stick heard Yellow shift, and looked over at him. For a moment he thought that he saw a blue glow floating beside Yellow, but it was gone when he blinked his eyes. He blinked again. It must be very late. Well, at least Yellow was finally slipping into sleep. His breathing was slowing. Stick was worried. Yellow was a good fighter and--dare he admit it?--a good friend. He had no idea what might be wrong, but he hoped that it was just tiredness, as Yellow insisted. They needed Yellow.

Well, there was nothing he could do about it but keep an eye on him. For the next few days, he'd do just that. Now, though, he'd get some sleep. Yellow wasn't the only one who was tired.



Curses! The dimmer ones are in the same space as the bright one. It cannot risk feeding with the others present. It will have to wait until another time. There are plenty of beings here. It will feed from one of them this time. Let the bright one rest. It will return to him again and when the time comes, it will leave with the bright one again. This one will not get away.



"Well, we've got the rest of the day to kill. What do you think we should do?" Ray pushed the remains of breakfast around on his plate. Brunch would have been a better description, as it was already nearly noon.

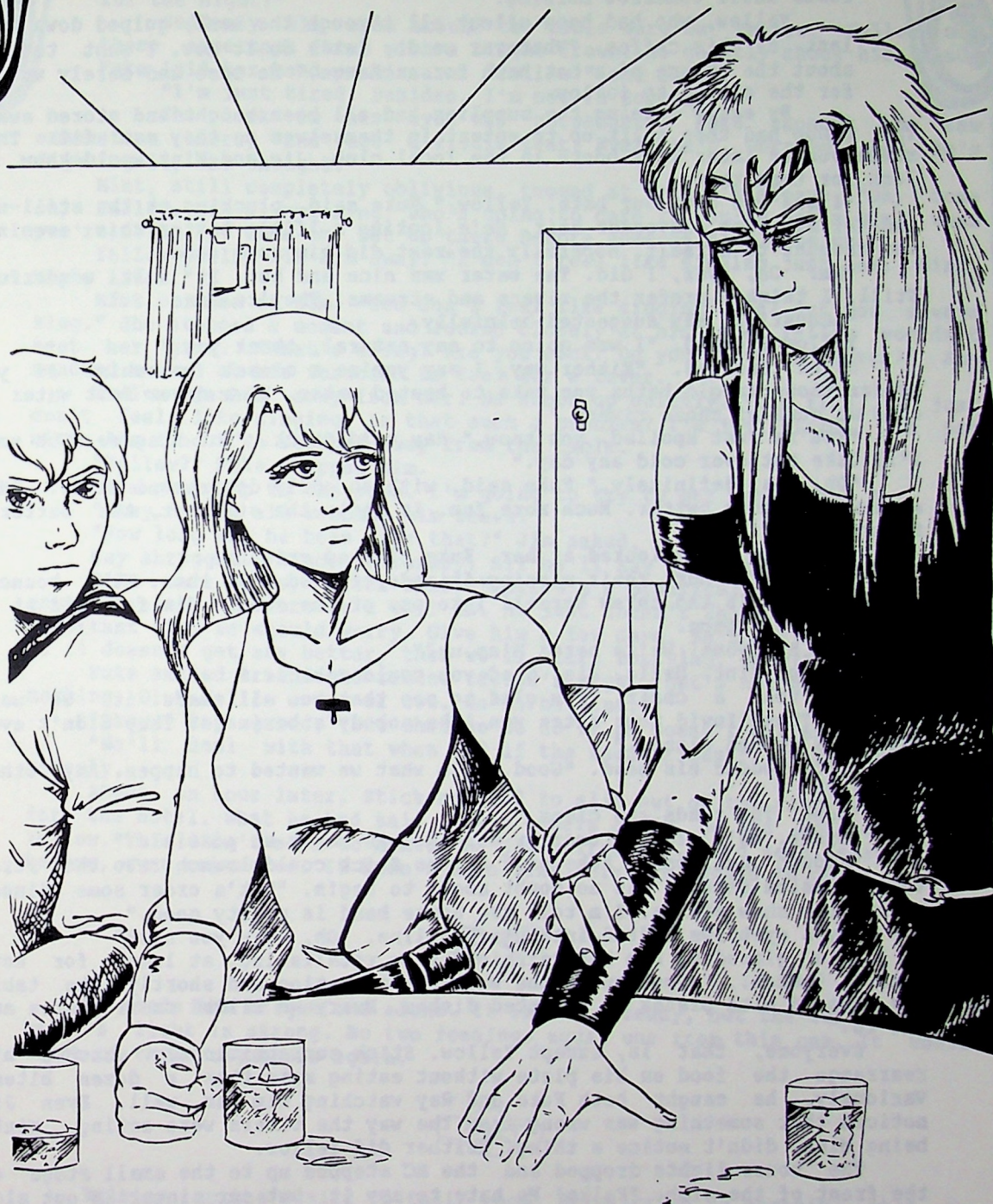
"I don't figure Jim and Mint will get here for a while yet. I say we should just kick back and take whatever comes by way of recreation." Fuke sighed, glancing around the dining room. It would be nice to perhaps get away from the guys for a while and indulge in a little female fun. Do a little "window shopping", so to speak. If last night's crowd were any indication, she might even be in the market to buy. It sure was nice of the others to give her a room all to herself.

"We should look into picking up provisions. In case we have to leave in any kind of hurry."

Ray groaned. "Bite your tongue, Stick. I was hoping for at least one more night in a bed before we go back to the hard, cold ground again."

"So was I, Ray, but one thing I've learned is to take precautions. When have we ever had three nights of decent sleep in a row?"

"Frightening as it is, you're right. So, let's get this over with now, so we can have as much free time as possible. We can stash everything in our



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rooms until tomorrow morning."

Yellow, who had been silent all through the meal, gulped down the last of his coffee. "Whatever we do, let's do it now. I want to see about the chance of a hot bath for a change." He rose and barely waited for the others to follow.

By early evening the supplies had all been bought and stored away. The group had then split up to entertain themselves as they saw fit. They rendezvoused later at a booth in the local club. Jim and Mint would know to look for them there.

"I see you got your bath, Yellow," Fuke said, plucking at the still-wet ends of his long, lavender hair. He's looking a little better this evening, she thought to herself. Hopefully the rest did him some good.

"Hm? Oh, yes, I did. The water was nice and hot. It felt wonderful. Still, I think I prefer the rivers and streams. They're more...."

"Acoustic?" Ray suggested helpfully.

Yellow frowned. "I was going to say natural, thank you."

Stick snorted. "Either way, I say you're a closet masochist if you prefer those frigid baths you take to heated water. I've never felt water as cold as some of those rivers."

"You're just spoiled, you know," Ray told Stick. "But I agree with you. I'll take hot over cold any day."

"Oh, yes, definitely," Fuke said, with an oddly distracted smile. "Hot showers are much better. Much more fun. In fact, the steamier, the better." She sighed.

All three males looked at her. Fuke blushed crimson.

Luckily for her, their missing friends arrived just then. Mint bounced up to the table and threw herself into one of the seats. Jim followed at a more leisurely pace.

"Hi, everyone! We're here! Miss us?"

"Hello, Mint. Hello, Jim. Glad you could make it."

Jim took a chair. "I'm glad to see that you all made it. We were worried. Those Invid took after you like nobody's business. They didn't even give us a second glance."

Stick nodded his head. "Good. It's what we wanted to happen. Any other trouble?"

"None. The roads are clear."

"Great. We'll leave tomorrow morning. As early as possible."

"Enough business," Fuke said before Stick could launch into the strategy session that he was no doubt about to begin. "Let's order some dinner before the show starts. I'm told the house band is pretty good."

Ray's eyebrows lifted into his hairline. "Oh, were you now?"

Fuke glared at him but refrained from retaliating, at least for now. Later, though... She caught the waiter's attention and shortly the table was covered with plates of assorted dishes. Everyone filled their plates and set to.

Everyone, that is, except Yellow. Stick surreptitiously watched him rearrange the food on his plate without eating more than a dozen bites. Various, he caught both Fuke and Ray watching him as well. Even Jim noticed that something was wrong from the way the others were acting. Mint, being Mint, didn't notice a thing. Neither did Yellow.

The house lights dropped and the MC stepped up to the small stage at the front of the club. "Folks! We hate to say it, but our singer is out sick tonight. That won't stop us, though. Instead, we're throwing the mike open. It's talent night at the O.K. Bar and Grill! Any of you want to be a star

for the night?"

Suddenly all eyes around the table were on Yellow. Yellow met those expectant faces with a slight frown. He quietly shook his head. Fuke laid her hand on his arm. "Yellow?" she asked.

"I'm just tired. Besides, I'm not in costume."

The look in his eyes was unreadable. Fuke thought she saw exhaustion there, and not a little fear. Even he's worried, but he's fighting it, she thought.

Mint, still completely oblivious, tugged at Yellow's sleeve. "Oh, come on, Yellow. You always sing. Who's going to care if you're not a girl when you're doing it? Come on. Get up there before someone else gets up."

Yellow pulled his arm away. "I don't feel like singing just now, Mint. Maybe later."

Mint blinked at him. "You don't feel like singing? You? But you always sing." She stopped a moment and looked closely at his face. Yellow wouldn't meet her gaze. "What's wrong? Are you sick? Do you have a fever?" She reached a hand at his forehead to feel for a fever.

Yellow jerked away from her. He stood up quickly. "I'm fine. I just don't feel like singing. Is that such a problem? I'm just tired. I'm not sick. I'm fine." He stepped away from the table.

"Yellow?" Fuke stopped him.

"I'm going up to the room. I'm going to try to get some sleep."

"Okay." They all watched him leave.

"How long has he been like that?" Jim asked.

Ray shrugged. "Since yesterday. All he'll say is that he's tired."

"I'm sure he is," Stick said. "Yellow's a practical sort. If it were anything else, I'm sure he'd tell us. He just doesn't think it's anything so important that we should worry. Give him a few days. He's taking care of it. If it doesn't get any better, then we'll start worrying, okay?"

Fuke smiled around the table. "Stick's right. Let's not get excited over nothing. Give Yellow a day or two. He'll be fine."

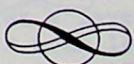
"Okay," Ray agreed, "but what do we do if he doesn't get any better?"

"We'll deal with that when and if the need arises," Stick told him sternly.

About an hour later, Stick managed to slip out of the club. He headed for the hotel. What he had said to the others aside, he was worried about Yellow. This didn't seem to him to be just tiredness. He'd seen Yellow tired before, even exhausted. It hadn't been like this. He wanted to check on him.



It finds the bright one alone. It is fed already, but the lure of this being's light is strong. No two feedings equal one from this one. It would taste of that brightness again.



Walking up the stairs to their room, Stick tried to organize what he wanted to say to Yellow. He was so touchy--that in itself was an indication that all was not right--that he might not be willing to listen to anything

he said. Stick wouldn't push him, but he wanted to at least try to talk to him. Maybe if they talked things out, they would come up with an answer.

At the very least, he'd be letting Yellow know that he was there if Yellow needed any help. Stick knew that most everyone thought him cold and uncaring, but that wasn't the case. It was his own pain that kept him remote. The memory of that pain held him back from making any attachments; attachments could lead to more pain considering the dangerous road they were on. But in this case, now that he'd admitted it to himself, he couldn't deny that Yellow was his friend, and he couldn't walk away from a friend in need.

With this realization in mind, Stick knocked twice quickly on the door and walked into the room.

The tableau that met his eyes froze him with his hand on the doorknob. The smell of ozone struck him like a blow. He felt his hair stand on end.

Yellow lay stretched out on his bed, the sheets a tangle around him. He was panting softly. Stick could see, in the blue light that illuminated the room, the sheen of sweat that covered him.

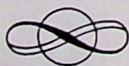
The light came from the... creature?... that hung in the air above Yellow. It looked like nothing more than a lightning bolt caught in the act of striking. It shone blue with flashes of purple that ran through it like a pulse. It hung about a meter's distance above Yellow. Stick had the impression that it had just pulled away from him.

The thing's "head"--two permanent purple spots appeared to be eyes--hovered closer to Yellow's. A tendril of lightening shot from the creature to touch Yellow's lips. It moved across them to his throat, down to his chest, seeming to caress its way downward and then upwards again. Yellow whimpered gently. With a last touch to the lips, the tendril pulled away, and as Stick watched in shock, the whole creature floated to the corner of the room where walls met ceiling and passed through, taking the room's only light with it.

Stick stared at the spot for what seemed an eternity, before the rustling of the sheets returned his attention to the room's other occupant. Yellow had rolled to curl on his side, his hands caught in the tangle of sheets. Stick could hear his breathing slowing to normal as he fell into a deeper sleep. The sweat dried from his skin and he began to shiver. Stick walked over to quietly disentangle the sheets and pull them over the sleeping man.

"I must be going mad." Stick thought, surprisingly nonchalantly. "I have no idea what the... I just saw. Or what I'm going to do about it. I do know that I'd better think of something, or I may lose this man to that thing."

I must be mad, he thought again. I'm not even questioning the reality of what I saw. I believe it. Now, what to do about it? He sank to his own bed, his hands clenched into fists. What to do?



Ten o'clock the next morning found the companions ready to travel. They waited only for Stick.

"Where'd he say he had to go, Fuke?" Ray lounged against his cycle, fiddling with a length of wire he'd found in the room that morning.

"He said he had to pick up something he'd forgotten when we were shopping yesterday. Said it shouldn't take him long to get it."

It didn't. Stick returned after ten more minutes had passed, carrying an anonymous brown parcel. Without a word of explanation beyond a quick "Sorry to keep you waiting," he flung the package into the jeep and mounted his bike.

"Let's be off, shall we?" he said, keying the power cell to life.

"Informative, isn't he?" Ray nudged Yellow.

"It's his business," Yellow answered, starting his own engine. Beyond him, the jeep roared to life. Yellow winced at the volume.

The group left Alzavedes as quietly as they'd entered, falling into a formation of sorts, the bikes running before and beside the jeep. The roads were clear and surprisingly well maintained. They made good speed. Spirits lifted in the crisp morning air. As the sun rose higher in the sky, it would get hot once again, everyone knew, but at the moment it was the perfect weather for riding.

Fuke found herself humming a tune as she rode. She identified the song as one of Yellow's more upbeat creations which he'd sung for them one day as they'd sat beside a lake eating lunch. It had been the first time she'd heard him sing in a man's voice, and the song had stuck in her head. He had a marvelous voice and she found that she missed it.

With that thought in mind, Fuke turned to glance at Yellow. He'd dropped back to take up a position just behind the jeep, not his usual point position. She knew he'd moved to the rear to hide from the others that he was slowing, that his reaction time was down. She had seen it immediately, having studied his driving often enough as he'd ridden before her at the front of the group. Even from a distance, she could see the dark circles around his eyes.

Movement beside her made Fuke look away from Yellow. Stick had drifted up beside her. He glanced backwards at Yellow, then back to her. His eyes asked questions. Fuke understood. She nodded once, then shook her head slowly. Yes, she'd seen his worsening condition. No, she had no idea what to do about it.

Stick nodded back. As he'd thought. He stared at the jeep a moment, chewing his lower lip, then met her eyes in an intense stare. "I have a plan," he mouthed to her. "I'll explain later. Just be ready. I'll need help." He gunned his engine and pulled away from her. Fuke could only stare after him.

Stick called a halt sometime later in the afternoon. They found a shaded clearing beside the road. A stream bubbled not ten yards away through the brush. As always, Yellow grabbed up his soap and towel and was off even before the others had settled. Four pair of eyes watched him go.

Fuke all but leaped at Stick. "What do you know? What plan? What could we possibly do to help?" She backed Stick around the clearing until he came up against the jeep. "Well?!"

"What's all this?" Jim asked, confused.

Ray stepped around his bike, into the clearing. "Stick, do you know what's wrong with Yellow?"

"He won't let me check him for a fever," Mint complained. "How can I figure out what's wrong if he won't even let me do that?"

"What's wrong with Yellow is not an illness." Stick sighed, pushed off from the jeep. "Sit down, everyone. I'll explain." He waited for the others to comply. He himself did not sit; he paced around the clearing.

"Last night when I left the club, I went back to the room. I wanted to

check on Yellow."

"You were worried?" Ray asked. "You were the one who told us not to get excited over it."

"Yes, I was worried, Ray, but there was no need for everyone to be worried."

"You worry enough for the rest of us, huh?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Anyway, I went back to the room. I knew I'd find Yellow there. I wanted the chance to talk with him, but he was asleep when I got there. And he wasn't alone."

Ray snorted. "That was fast. It's a short walk. Was it male or female? I've been wondering about that."

"Ray," Fuke growled, "if you don't shut up, I'm going to put your teeth down your throat. Now sit there and don't say another word." Fuke nodded and gestured for Stick to continue.

"Thank you, Fuke." He paced another half-circle around the clearing before continuing. "When I got to the room, I knocked and walked in. The first thing that I noticed was the smell in the air, ozone. It's an odd smell to walk in on, not something you expect to find in your hotel room. And there was a feeling in the air, an electricity that made my hair stand on end."

"Ozone and electricity? What could they possibly have to do with Yellow?" Mint asked.

Stick glanced at her and continued, "The only light in the room was a strange blue light, and it came from the... thing... that was causing the ozone and electricity."

"Thing?" Fuke twisted around to watch Stick as he passed behind her for the third time.

"It was some sort of creature. It looked like a living lightening bolt, all blue flame and pulses of purple running through it. It had two 'eyes'. It was hovering over Yellow on the bed. He was unconscious and all tangled in the sheets. It stuck out a tongue or tendril and touched him. I don't know what it did, but he moaned. Then it sort of floated up to the ceiling and passed right out through the wall. I just stood there staring after it, until Yellow rolled over and started to shiver. I've been trying to figure the thing out ever since. I think I've got an answer."

There was silence for a minute, then Ray slowly tipped sideways to roll on the ground.

"You expect us to believe that fairy tale? Come on, Stick, enough of the jokes. Yellow is really sick. We need to decide what to do about it, not sit around and tell ghost stories. Save it for the campfire."

"It's the truth."

"Sure, Stick. And how many drinks did you have at the club?"

Stick clenched his fists, but said nothing.

Fuke had been watching him closely throughout his tale. She looked at his face, at the tightness around his eyes and mouth. She read his expression and his body language. She believed him. Crazy as it all sounded, she believed him.

"Ray," she spoke quietly, "Stick didn't drink at all last night. He never does and you know it. And as you like to remind us every so often, he has no sense of humor. I think he's telling the truth."

"Come off it, Fuke. A living lightening bolt? This, I don't believe unless I see it with my own eyes."

Stick glanced up at the sky. "If what I suspect is true, you'll do just that. But be ready to act. I don't know how much time we'll have. Let me explain my plan. Then we'll go get Ray his proof."



On the bank of the river, Yellow sat with his knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around them. He sat staring at the water. He had yet to take his bath. The towel and soap lay unused beside him.

God, I don't even have the energy to strip, let alone bathe, he thought. What is wrong with me? I'm so unbelievably tired. I've started losing control. I almost wiped out a couple of times today on the bike because I blacked out for an instant. I can't keep going on like this. I'm going to get myself killed. And maybe someone else, too. He laid his head on his knees. I'm just so tired all the time. I ache all over. I've never ever felt this badly before. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. He rocked back and forth as tears of frustration and pain soaked into his sleeve.



Ah... Here is the bright one. Marvelous. It will feed. The need is not as strong but the want is grown. The bright one's taste is unparalleled.

But see... the bright one is still aware. It will move stealthily, carefully. The bright one will not sense its approach... Good. The bright one is unaware. One touch and it will feed...



Rocking gently, still curled in upon himself, Yellow cried himself to sleep.



Cool hands settle on his shoulders, begin to massage the corded muscles there. The hands are quite skilled and he relaxes to their magic.

He feels the owner of those hands lean toward him, feels a gentle kiss on the back of his neck. It sends shivers down his spine. Reaching up to grasp one of the hands still working on his shoulders, he pulls it around to place a kiss in its palm. He feels a sigh against his back.

He turns to face his lover, to trace a kiss from the palm to the crook of the elbow, to the shoulder, to the throat. He brushes aside silver hair to nibble gently on his lover's throat, to nuzzle and murmur in his ear.

Meanwhile his hands roam, exploring, stroking, arousing. His lover arches back, body forming a silver bow. He sighs at the sight. Slim body. Pale skin. Beautiful.

He continues his ministrations with his mouth. His tongue finds his nipples and pauses to play there. His lover moans softly, reaching to run his hands into his hair, grabbing, pulling him upwards into a kiss, tongues meeting, caressing. His lover's hands begin their own wandering. His do likewise.

They are pressed together from thigh to chest, their mutual arousal evident between them. His mouth is again at his lover's throat. Delicious. His lover moans, begins to shudder. He wraps him in a hug, holds tightly until the shudders pass, then slowly releases him. He tilts his face to meet his own, questions without words. His lover nods, yes, now. He turns him in their embrace.

He goes slowly, though the joining is easy. They fit together well. His lover leans back against his chest as he begins to move. Those cool, cool hands are constantly moving, now reaching up to play in his hair, now reaching behind to stroke the length of his hip, now going forward to where his own hands seek to double his lover's pleasure.

Somehow the pale body pressed before him twists, and they kiss. The kiss is quick and heralds a change in the pace. His lover reaches back to urge him to greater speed. He can no more argue than stop the sea. Faster. Faster still. His lover throws his head back, his mouth open to shout his joy, but he has no voice to shout, he can only gasp. He presses his face into the now damp silver hair and cries his own joy. The world explodes.



Ecstasy! To be satiated! It basks in the warmth of its content.

But what is this? The bright one offers more of its light? Amazing, but why? It moves away to study the bright one below it. So. The patterns of light pulse and flicker. The bright one senses its ending and is offering what is left to be taken. Remarkable.

It hesitates. To cease now will stop the bright one's ending, but will mean feeding from the dimmer ones for a period. To continue would bring on the ending, but the light of ending is ever the sweetest light to feed from. Yet it is the end of that sweet light, not to shine again, to be fed from again.

The bright one offers again. It cannot resist. It will feed again. It will be careful, perhaps not to bring on complete ending. It moves close again.



They crept through the underbrush, trying to be as quiet as possible as they approached the stream. Stick heard Jim stumble and curse softly under his breath. Luckily, it wasn't far to the water's edge. The brush ended, and they stood on the grassy bank. The stream ran fast before them, the lowering sun glinting painfully from its surface.

Fuke spotted them first. She caught the pulsing blue light from the corner of her eye.

Yellow lay on the bank not ten yards upstream from where they stood. Floating just above him was the creature, blue and purple fire. It had the

lower end of itself wrapped around Yellow's thigh. As they moved closer, they could see that the denim of Yellow's jeans was beginning to smolder from the contact.

"Now you see it with your own eyes, Ray. Do you believe me now?" Stick asked quietly. Ray could only nod.

Yellow's arms were stretched upwards as if to embrace the creature. His back was arched, his head thrown back, his hair a tangle about him. From three yards away the group could hear his breath rasping in his throat. As they watched, horrified, Yellow's arms slowly sank to the ground and his body went slack. The creature moved in even closer.

"No!" Fuke screamed. "It's killing him!"

Stick set the group in motion. He unslung his morning's purchase and threw an end to Ray. He took the other end. Jim stood ready beside him. Fuke fed out enough slack for Ray to reach the water's edge. When they were all set, Stick and Jim stepped towards Yellow and the creature.

"Be ready," he said. One more step.

"Yellow! Yellow, wake up! Wake up, damn you!" Stick yelled.



The dimmer ones! They surround it! In the ecstasy of feeding, it did not sense their approach. It must flee. It pulls away from the bright one, whose light, it sees, is very dim but not ended. This, at least, is a good thing. The bright one will not end. It releases its hold on the bright one and drifts upwards.

And the bright one becomes aware. Aware, the bright one's light shifts in pattern, begins to pulse stronger. It pauses, amazed at the resiliency of these ones.

It begins to move again.



Stick yelled Yellow's name again.

Slowly, while everyone held their breath, Yellow opened his eyes. He blinked once and focused on what was before him: the creature. It seemed he looked into the face of a star, cool blue light. The purple eyes sparked brightly and seemed to be watching him in return.

The tableau held for a seeming eternity before the creature started to move once again. At that instant, Jim leaped forward and grabbed up Yellow from where he lay. Simultaneously, Stick threw what he held at the creature and Ray threw his end into the stream. The copper wire flew through the air and connected with the creature as it rose. It jerked as the wire seemed to take on a life of its own and coil around the blue flame length.

Everybody leaped to get away, but they didn't quite make it. As the wire caught the creature, a burst of electricity exploded around the group, acting like a lightning strike. They were thrown across the open space of the bank and landed in the bushes at the forest's edge. Stunned, they lay where they had fallen and watched the final throws of the creature.

It thrashed and jumped within the coils of the copper wire. Its frantic struggles did no good. The creature's brilliance slowly grew dimmer. In the



end, nearly transparent, it sank to the ground, the wire still binding it. It rested on the grass for a mere moment before its light faded completely. The wire fell to the ground. There was nothing left of the creature.



"I welcomed it," Yellow finished his tale. "I welcomed its sleeping pleasure in place of the pain of wakefulness. I would gladly have died for it." He shivered with the memory. Mint, thinking that he was cold, offered him more hot soup, which he declined. She continued to fuss around him. (She'd been left behind in the clearing to watch the bikes and felt somewhat guilty that she'd not been there to help in the rescue.)

"You nearly did," Fuke reminded him.

"It was a close thing, this whole business," Jim agreed. "If Stick hadn't chanced on the thing back in Alzavedes, we'd never have known. But he did, and now everything will be fine. You'll just need to rest until you get back on your feet."

"Most important thing right now, I think, is sleep," Fuke said, standing up. "I can see it in your eyes. I'm amazed that you're conscious at all. We're going to leave you to it, right now. You sleep yourself out. We'll be staying here for a few days. No need to wake up at any particular time." She made shooing gestures at the others.

"I have just one question, if you will." Ray stopped them. "Stick, how did you figure out how to kill it?"

Stick laughed. "It was easy. The two things that I knew about this thing were that it smelled like ozone and caused an electric charge. I figured that it had to be some sort of electric being, bio-electric. To get rid of an unwanted electrical charge, you simply ground it. Between the copper wire and the water, I channeled its energy harmlessly into the ground."

"Smart." Yellow grinned. "But what if you'd been wrong?"

Stick shrugged. "Dunno."

"Oh, thanks."

"That's enough for now." Fuke stepped between them. "You get to sleep, Yellow. We'll try not to wake you."

"Thanks. And I mean for everything. You're great friends."

Ray and Fuke grinned and turned to look at Stick. Would he admit it?

Stick smiled at Yellow. "No problem. What are friends for, after all?" He turned and walked away. The rest followed.

Yellow rolled himself into his sleeping bag and settled in. As he drifted off to sleep he hummed quietly to himself. Fuke, lingering close by, heard. She recognized the song she'd been humming earlier that day. She smiled. Everything was going to be fine now. Yellow was singing again. She tiptoed away as the humming faded into quiet breathing.

"Sleep well."

end

VOLTRON County : EPISODE ONE

WYMAN '86

PRINCE LOTOR, YOU HAVE FAILED AT EVERY ASSIGNMENT I'VE GIVEN YOU! YOU HAVE FAILED TO CONQUER PLANET ARUS, AND YOU HAVE FAILED TO DESTROY VOLTRON! SO I'VE DECIDED TO GET YOU A LITTLE HELP!



I'M GOING TO ASSIGN YOU A TACTICAL EXPERT. — MUGWART, HERE, JUST ARRIVED FROM THE DRUEL EMPIRE HE IS GOING TO ASSIST YOU



NICE PAD YOU GOT HERE, ZARKON. COULD USE A BIT OF JAZZING-UP, THOUGH... IT NEEDS A COUPLE VELVET PAINTINGS...



YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!

DEADLY SERIOUS



Thoughts Contingent on a Three-Second Warning



by V.M. Wyman

So.

A wise man once said it was a difference of opinion that made all horse races. If this is the case, Jigen and I ought to open up a racetrack.

We have, at one point or other, argued about most everything. Our personal tastes and lifestyles are so divergent there is plenty of food for argument, but the one subject we disagree on most vehemently is our differing tastes in weapons.

Jigen prefers a gun.

I (of course) prefer a sword.

Our disagreements on this topic have grown more cordial over the years, but their intensity has not dimmed. The gist of our difference of opinion is this:

For my part, I believe that a gun is a dishonorable weapon. It is often a weapon of distance and stealth and it does not require either courage or skill to use. Any idiot can pick up a gun and kill with it. Idiots often do.

In Jigen's opinion, a sword is an archaic weapon. He agrees that a sword is honorable, but claims that makes it an anomaly in this dishonorable world. Using a sword, he says, assumes equanimity on the part of one's opponent when such is usually not the case. One of these days, says he, some "idiot" is going to blow my \$\$\$\$ brains out!

Now I am willing to concede that it does require courage and skill to use a gun as effectively as Jigen uses one, and I am willing to concede that this is a dishonorable world, but just because one man uses a dishonorable weapon honorably is no reason for me to condone these weapons in general or

stoop to the use of them. Jigen has described me as a "hard-ass" on the subject and, in this, he is absolutely right.

Lupin himself is careful to remain neutral on this matter. All weapons are tools as far as he's concerned. They do not possess such subtle differences as honor or dishonor. He maintains that if someone is trying to hurt you, you should be free to use whatever weapon is close at hand, be that weapon a gun, a sword or a monkey wrench.

In theory, I could argue that bushido requires hand-to-hand combat. In practice, I find I have no argument at all. If someone is trying to kill you and all you have is a sledgehammer, for Pete's sake hit them with the sledgehammer! Bushido implies that guns are dishonorable, but it specifically states that failure is more dishonorable yet.

Jigen and I have a great difference of opinion in our choice of weapons, but neither of us decries the need for them. Thieving can be a very dangerous business. People tend to resent it when you take their property, and while most of them are content to trust in the retribution of the Law, some prefer to take matters into their own hands.

Over the years, Lupin, Jigen and I have all made enemies. Most of these enemies have only what Lupin calls "nuisance value". That is, they would do us injury if the opportunity presented itself, but would not go to any lengths to create that opportunity. Of the enemies we have acquired, only a small percentage actually want us dead.

Of this small percentage, Lupin possesses the lion's share. After all, he is leader and is therefore the most visible of us. He also has a tendency to champion causes and so tends to offend people more deeply. In addition, Lupin has a flamboyant and sometimes caustic sense of humor that can inflame volatile temperaments.

Lupin is aware of these sometimes deadly sentiments, but he doesn't let them bother him. They come with the territory as far as he's concerned. Occasionally they are a problem to be dealt with, but more often they are a cross to be borne. Whatever pitfalls lie waiting for Lupin in his murky future, he is confident he'll survive them.

He has every reason to be confident. Lupin is a survivor. He is a facile creature, quick to react, quick to adapt and cunning as a ferret. He is also a proponent of self-made Luck. He contends that if you believe you will be lucky, then you will be.

For the most part, I share his sentiments, only I'm a little wary of Luck. Relying on Luck can be dangerous. You see, Luck is also a weapon and, unlike my katana, it cuts both ways.



It may have been Luck or it may have been Fate which brought us to upstate New York. Ostensibly, it was the need for solitude which prompted the journey. Thieving can be a tiring business and Lupin was feeling the need for rest. He decided to retreat into the wilds of New York and go camping.

We went with him because we are, for the most part, inseparable. Besides, I was a creature of solitude and found the vastness of Nature soothing. Jigen, while not an adamant camper, had no objection to it and thought it might be a nice change of pace.

We selected a spot five miles north of the main road where a series of

stony ridges broke through the heavy vegetation and ran roughly parallel to each other. The four principle ridges played back to a rocky abutment and so resembled the splayed fingers of a giant hand. Between the index and middle fingers of this hand, a snow-swollen stream coursed whitely, spilling over rocks and runnels to reach the gully far below.

After bathing in this snow-cold torrent, I retreated to the crest of one of these ridges to warm myself in the late-morning sun. Lupin was already there, lying sprawled and shirtless on a beach-towel. Opening one sleepy brown eye, he took note of me and rolled up on his side. "Finished freezing your ass off, have you?" he asked with a lazy grin.

"Hai," I agreed, sitting next to him. "And it wasn't that cold."

(Actually, it was that cold, but I was a firm believer in a little suffering being good for the ki.)

"Ji back yet?"

"Not as far as I know," I replied, half-closing my eyes. I was beginning to thaw in the butter-warm sun and it felt wonderful. "I did not see him at the campsite."

Jigen had gone off on a hike through the woods. Supposedly he had done this with the intention of picking up additional firewood, but I suspected he had really gone off to see if he could locate a group of lady hikers he and Lupin had spotted traveling north yesterday. Reconnaissance forays had begun immediately and yielded no results, but Jigen was a resolute man and he saw no reason not to give it one last try.

"He better hurry," Lupin decided. "It's almost lunch time."

Actually there was a good hour to go before noon, but such abstractions as Time meant nothing to Lupin's stomach. Lupin enjoyed his food. He usually devoured it with gusto. As a matter of fact, it was dangerous to get your fingers too close to his mouth with one of his "feeding frenzies" struck him. Camping made him hungrier than usual.

Lupin stood, stretching luxuriantly. "I'm heading down to camp," he said. "Do you want to come with me or should I just call you when lunch is ready?"

"I will wait here," I began. "I..." And I stopped.

I wasn't entirely sure why I stopped, I just did. Something was wrong. The wrongness of it thrummed across my senses like a bow across violin strings. Instantly, I was alert, the soothing sun forgotten.

Lupin took immediate notice of my alarm. The sleepiness fell from him. "What's the matter?"

I couldn't say. I didn't know. Our time in the woods had been peaceful in the extreme. Our whole trip had been remarkable in its total uneventfulness. The only incident that struck me as even remotely threatening had been back at La Guardia. There, I'd thought I saw someone following us. The man had been little, bearded, unkept and very much interested in the paper bag he was carrying clenched in one fist. I had pointed him out to Lupin, who watched for a while and dismissed the man as "harmless".

I had accepted Lupin's judgment, but the whole business bothered me somewhat. There wasn't anything particularly threatening about that old wino, but something about him caused my intuitive alarms to sound.

Just like they were sounding now.

"What is it?" Lupin insisted.

I did not answer. There was no time. I saw a single, bright, metallic flash from the ridge paralleling ours to the west and I knew it was the sun glinting off the telescopic sight of a high-power rifle. I did not question

how I knew this, suddenly I just knew it. I had about three seconds to react.

It is an oddity of human nature that causes Time to expand or contract randomly during situations of stress. The less time one has, the longer that time seems to take. Of course, all reflexes and reactions are slowed, too, giving Reality a nightmarish quality. Moving with the slowness of a man in a dream, I bolted to my feet, planted a hand in the middle of Lupin's chest and shoved him backwards. He fell with an equally eerie slowness, uttering an outraged cry that sounded vaguely like my name. "G-O-E-M-O-N-!" Lupin yelped as he slid down the rocky slope to safety behind a boulder.

This left me alone on the ridge.

The bullet wasn't meant for me. I was just too slow to get out of its way.

I didn't hear the shot. I didn't see the flash. Suddenly something hit me in the belly with the power of a champion prizefighter. Still wrapped in that eerie Time-distortion, I was lifted off my feet and thrown backwards. I saw the ground and sky change places and the sun flash across my vision like a shooting star. There was no pain, there was only a sensation of crushing pressure and bodily outrage. I struggled to breathe, to move, but my flesh wouldn't respond. I tumbled helplessly and struck the first ledge.

It didn't hurt. It had hurt last time. The last time, it had hurt like hell! I thought they'd blown my right arm off! I remember being surprised that the limb was still attached to my body. I remember Jigen grinning at me and telling me not to worry about the pain. Pain was never a bad sign when it came to gunshot wounds. It was the bad ones that didn't hurt.

(This doesn't hurt, Jigen. I guess that means it's serious, huh?)

Heavy, grating thud followed by the involuntary expulsion of air from my body. Impact shaking bone and sinew, but feeling dull, as if my flesh was anesthetized or packed in cotton. I lurched, slipped, fell again. Second ledge.

MON DIEU!! GOEMON!!

A series of simple, stupid pops, like firecrackers exploding. Gunfire always sounds so ludicrous from a distance!

FILS DU LA CHIENNE!! JIGEN! JIGEN, I NEED YOU NOW!!!

I slid; clothing tore; stones tumbled, their rest disturbed. Limply, my body fetched up against something. The falling stopped.

I was torn and bruised, but I couldn't feel it. I wasn't even sure I was holding my katana. I couldn't feel it in my fingers. The sun was rainbow-ringed. The rock face above me was starting to blur. Sun and shadows began to spin, darkness winning.

What a gaijin way to die! Gutted by a stupid bullet! My Warrior Soul cried out at the indignity of it, but I quickly silenced that cry. Death was the inevitable result of Life. Death in combat was the privilege of the Warrior Class. There was no point decrying the circumstances of it! One could only face it with dignity and have done! I was Samurai, for god's sakes.

The spiral continued, darkness victor. I fought for consciousness the way a drowning man fights for air. I had to have time to prepare. To compose...

Poem...

That was Tradition.

That was required.



Got to think. So hard to think. The sun the color of blood.
But I've got to.
Got to.
So.

...
...
Quickly does the Blade cut,
Parting the paper *shoji*.
Quickly do the Wings beat,
A pale shadow no longer.

...
...
Done.
Free.

...
...
...
...
Goemon?
GOEMON!!

Listen to me, you crazy samurai shit! You've got to hang on! If you don't hang on, then I've won! I always said some pencil-necked bastard with a gun would punch your ticket. If you give up, I'll win our argument. You can't let that happen, right? C'mon, you stubborn SOB, you never willingly conceded an argument in your life! Prove me wrong!!

You hear me, Goemon?
Do you?
Hear?

...
...
...

"Do you hear me, boy?" the old man said. He was a tall, barrel-chested character with a hawkish face and a wispy beard that was white even then. "If you continue to hold the sword like that, you're going to snap your damn wrist! Hold it straight! STRAIGHT! Put the power of your arm behind it!"

"Yes, Master!" I said.

The blade flashed out, glinting in the sunlight. The arm that held it was reed-thin with preadolescence. The muscle had just begun to develop under the taut skin. The slender fingers were now big enough to hold the hilt, but they weren't yet strong enough to support the blade.

The melon, seated resignedly on its garden stump, toppled into two pieces with a splatter of seeds.

The old man grunted. "Better," he conceded, "but not good enough. Observe!" He placed another melon on the stump, took the sword and assumed the Warrior's stance, feet squarely planted. There was a blur of motion and he straightened, returning the sword to me.

The melon remained seated on its stump.

"I don't understand, Master," said I.

"Touch the point of your blade to the melon, Boy. See what happens!"

The blade reached out, a tentative finger now, and tapped the crown of the melon. It flowered open into six equal sections and lay spread on the stump, glistening wetly, not a seed out of place.

The effect was both magical and humbling. The green grass was soft as I knelt on it. "I am sorry I am so stupid, Master."



"You're not stupid, Goe-chan. If you were stupid, I never would have agreed to take you as my pupil. You'll learn, just give yourself time. It takes time to turn a seedling into a tree, neh? You'll be a proper swordsman one day. You've got the instincts for it. Right now, though, you're costing me a fortune in melons! Do me a favor and learn to hold that damn sword straight!"

Yes, Master!

Yessir!

Yoshi!

...

...

...

Dragonfly wings across the sky. See them beating in delicate rhythm? Wind blasting out of a cloudless blue, stinking of petrol. A roar of sound, drowning men's voices as they run...

We have a Japanese male, twenty-eight years of age, one hundred fifty-two pounds. He has a bullet-wound in the upper left quadrant of his abdo-



men. Abdomen is slightly distended and tender. BP is ninety-five over sixty and stable for the moment. Pupils are dilated. Temperature is slightly subnormal. Respiration is sixty and shallow.

Roger, evac. Begin saline drip and transport immediately.

Ten-four.

Lupin?

It's so cold, Lupin.

So cold.

...

...

...

The morning wind blew out of the north, spangling light off the lake around the Castle. It had been a cold night and the newly-risen sun still had no warmth in it. I stood atop a tower of a ruined manor, mindless of the chill that tugged insistently at my body. Below me, Jigen huddled next to a massive machine gun, suffering quietly. Neither one of us had slept. Both of us were worried about Lupin, who had vanished earlier that morning into the depths of Castle Cagliostro.

The sun peered sleepily over the rim of the world, stirring the cold wind which had gusted intermittently all night long. Bright coins of gold light dappled the wind-roughened lake, dazzling the eye. Jigen hunkered in the sparse protection offered by the tower wall and amused himself by sticking sprays of foliage in the band of his hat, apparently in some off-handed attempt to disguise it.

A faint wail echoed across the water and I saw ribbons of smoke start to rise from the castle. The smoke didn't seem confined to any specific location, it just seemed to come from everywhere.

"Jigen."

"What?"

"There's a fire at the Castle. Look."

"An instant later, hoards of uniformed men started spilling out of various portions of the castle and running in all directions like terrorized ants. Two men broke away from the chaos and scrambled up an exterior stairway, armored guards in pursuit. One man wore a blue jacket. The other wore a dun trench coat.

"Lupin!" Jigen cried. "And he's got Zenigata with him! They're heading for the gyroplane on the corner tower. See?"

Yes, I did see. I saw also that they were barely going to make it ahead of Count Cagliostro's guards. Lupin leaped up into the plane as Zenigata turned to hold the castle hoards at bay. With a spluttering cough the little orange plane lurched forward, lumbering toward the edge of the helipad. Zenigata dashed to intercept it, leaping to grab the front strut just as it took flight.

Slowly, ponderously, the plane began to swing around, heading for the tower where Lady Clarice was imprisoned.

Once they had reached the tower, Lupin jumped from the gyroplane to its roof... much to the chagrin of Zenigata, who didn't know how to fly the fool plane. The detective dove frantically into the cockpit as Lupin slithered down the steep slate roof and vanished into a small, domed gable.

Sporadic gunfire had occurred throughout the altercation. Now that the gyroplane was in flight and beyond the reach of ordinary weapons, high-powered rifles with jacketed shells had been called in to assist. These zinging bursts soon outnumbered the popcorn-like cracks of the lesser fire-arms. Somehow, Zenigata managed to avoid the volleys as he careened wildly about the tower, fighting for control.

"Quickly," I heard Jigen pray. "You ain't got much time, Lupin!"

In answer to that prayer, Lupin reappeared. He had the slender, brown-haired Lady Clarice with him. While she sheltered in the protection of the gable, Lupin climbed on top of it, trying to grab the fore-wheel of the gyroplane's landing gear as Zenigata plunged by overhead. He was not successful.

"C'mon!" Jigen prayed again.

Anxious now, Lupin climbed higher up the roof, following Zenigata's unsteady trajectory. As the detective tried desperately to hover within reach, Lupin turned and lunged after that fore-wheel.

I heard the shot. It was one of many. At the sound of it, Lupin's body jolted forward and he froze. Beyond him, Zenigata's disobedient gyroplane burst into flames.

"LUPIN!" Jigen cried.

I said nothing at all. Inside me, my soul had become a Void. My Lord was down!

Lupin stood frozen for a moment, as if he couldn't quite believe it, then he collapsed. He tumbled helplessly down the steep slate, heading for a fall that would certainly kill him if the bullet hadn't done so already.

My body was cataleptized by the horror of my situation. My Lord was wounded. If he didn't receive immediate assistance, he was going to die. And I was helpless to help him! If I suddenly developed the power of flight, I still couldn't reach him in time!

Lupin's falling and I can do nothing.

I can't save him who saved me.

His hour of need has come and I am useless.

I can do nothing.

Nothing at all.

...
...
...
Doors crash open. Footsteps pound. Echoes haunt hard-tiled corridors. Running, running. Lights flash by overhead like windows on a train at night.

BP ninety over sixty. Pulse rapid and irregular. Temperature is 94.9. Respiration steady at 40.

Type and cross-match, stat.

What's this guy wearing? Are those pajamas?

Nyah, that's an oriental workout suit. This guy's a martial artist.

Y'know. Like Kung Fu.

Funny, he doesn't look like David Carradine.

Can we cut the comedy, people? I've got a patient going into shock here!

Not surprising. His buddies had to bump him over fifteen minutes of dirt roads before they could find a telephone.

Damn campers! Have X-ray stand by...

Yes, Doctor.

Hello...

What's this?

See those bindings over his gut? They're what's holding him together.

Like a tourniquet. The minute we cut them, we're going to open the flood-gates.

Swell.

Where's that damned type, huh?

Shall I make your day?

Hit me.

AB Negative.

Oh, that's just fine! That's fucking lovely!

This guy's a rare bird, all right.

...

...

...

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;

Close to the sun in lonely lands,

Ringed with azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;

He watches from his mountain walls,

And like a thunderbolt he falls.

...

And falls...

...

...

...

So tall, this glass escarpment! So naked to the star-strewn sky! When skyscrapers are really tall, they lose their manmade quality and become like breathing giants. Slumbering dragons, wafted by unencumbered winds...

I remember it was cold that night, too. It was winter and a frosting of snow lay over the city like a tracery of lace. The wind at that altitude was biting and cruel. It tore at my lightly-clad, adolescent body, but I didn't feel it. I was fueled by fires of hate within.

The man paused, his foot on the mounting-step of his private helicopter. The three men with him closed ranks. Two of the three pulled

pistols out of their jackets.

They could kill me in an instant, I knew, but I was willing to bet they wouldn't. Kasagi Itzo fancied himself descended from Samurai. I was here to give him a chance to prove it. I threw the second katana out onto the tarmac in front of him.

Even if he accepted my challenge and even if I slew him, I was probably going to die. That didn't matter. I had prepared myself for death. This man had wronged me grievously and my young life was a sacrifice to Vengeance!

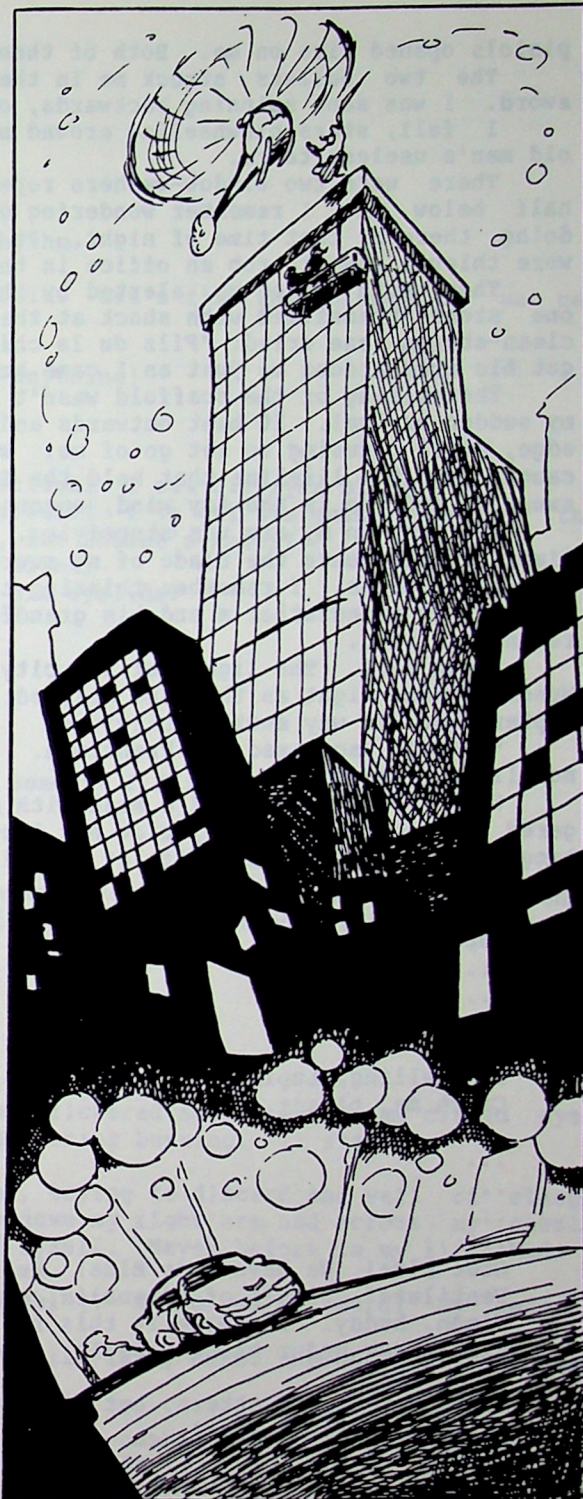
No! I heard the voice of my grandfather cry. I did not ask for this sacrifice! You are all that is left! If you throw your life away, the family Ishikawa will be no more! Thirteen generations will vanish from the Book of Time as if they had never existed. Think of the Future, Goe-chan. Please!

But the Future did not interest me, there on that lonely promontory, and the voice in my head was the voice of a ghost. This man had murdered my grandfather and stolen my inheritance, leaving me destitute and alone in a world which I, with my eclectic training, was ill-equipped to endure. I could have continued living with my Master, I knew, but I was too proud to accept his charity. I was determined to avenge this crime or die trying! I would not live with the shame Kasagi Itzo had perpetrated on my family!

"Pick it up!" I told him.

Kasagi only smiled. "You always were such a dreadful little bore, Goe-chan. I really can't be bothered with you."

The two men holding



pistols opened fire on me. Both of them. Once.

The two bullets struck me in the shoulder as I ducked and drew my sword. I was sent spinning backwards, off of the tarmac and off the roof...

I fell, stars pinwheeling around me. The wind keened softly with an old man's useless tears.

There were two window-washers roped to a scaffold about a floor and a half below me. I remember wondering distantly what window-washers were doing there at that time of night. It never once occurred to me that they were thieves come to rob an office in the penthouse of the building.

They both looked up, alerted by the sound of the shots. The bearded one stood transfixed with shock at the sight of my falling body, but the clean-shaven one cried: "Fils du la chienne!" and ran to intercept me. He got his arms around me just as I came hurtling past.

The railing of the scaffold wasn't strong enough to bear the impact of my sudden arrival. It bent outwards and the Frenchman was dragged over the edge, still refusing to let go of me. We fell another ten feet and stopped, caught by the lifeline that held the Frenchman tied to his scaffold. We swung to and fro in the icy wind, uncountable stories above the pavement.

The pain in my arm was stupefying. Scalding redness dribbled down that limb, trickled onto the blade of my sword and finally dripped into the Void yawning below us. I remember thinking that I must not let go of the sword. It was my grandfather's and his grandfather's before him. I must never relinquish it...

Blood fell. The lights of the city spun and danced like lunatic stars. Muscles froze tight as the mind drifted, fading. Above me, a private helicopter beat its way south, oblivious.

"JIGEN!" screamed the Frenchman. "For god's sakes, pull us up! He's not light, Jigen!"

Why? I thought, mind a mush with moist pain. You caught me, endangered yourself, and yet you do not know me. I endanger you still, as we hang in midair, but you won't let go, will you?

Never let go.

Ever.

Lupin.

...

...

...

Lupin?

I'm falling, Lupin.

Catch me, please.

...

...

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...

Code Blue! We have Code Blue! He's in cardiac arrest.

Ventilate! 30cc's of adrenalin, stat!

C'mon, buddy. You made it this far. Don't wig-out on us now...

Ribs creak under blunt assault. Body quakes. Inert meat.

Aw, c'mon!

We've got some flutters, but he's not holding it.

Get the paddles, stat!

Clear!

WHUMP!

Nope. Fading. Flat.
Shit!
Clear!

WHUMP!

Ha, got him! We have sinus rhythm.
Thank god...
Enough of the dramatics, people. Let's find that bleeder so we can
keep him alive. Suction.
Yes, Doctor.
SUCTION, dammit! I can't see anything!
Yes, Doctor.
John...
I'm busy.
John, I think this guy is conscious. I saw his eyes blink.
How the hell can he be conscious?! I've got his guts lying on the
table! He just went through defib, for Christ's sakes!
Dunno. I'm certain I saw him blink.
It's just a muscular spasm of his eyelids!
Yeah, that's got to be it.

...

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...

Half asleep, I hear a voice.

Is it only in my mind?

Or is it someone calling me? Someone I failed and left behind?

...

...

...

So warm, the Dark. So soft beneath me. No stars, no light, no sound.
If this is Death, I welcome it. Life was never so tender with me.
Soft and gooey, lotus-sleep.
So dark; so tender.
Drift....

...

...

...

My darkness was invaded. Light flickered softly across my closed eye-
lids. Shadows danced. I smelled something burning. It stank.
Cigarette smoke.

I shifted under the soft cover, trying to discard the veil of sleep.
Pain like molten lead flowed hotly down my right arm and across my chest,
burning. I whimpered in spite of myself. Never before in my life had I
experienced such crippling pain!

Even so, my fingers moved, searching. Where was my sword? My katana?
Where was it?!

Then I realized: The hilt was still in my hand. No one had succeeded
in taking the blade away from me.

I tried to lift my arm.

And the world exploded, dazzling with unshed tears. Godgodgod! Grand-
fatherMasterFather, please! It hurts so bad!

Child! Baby! Gutless eta! STOP SNIVELING! You are a Warrior!
I swallowed the bile and the unshed tears and lay still, gasping softly.

"Easy, fellah," a rough voice said kindly. "You're okay now."
I opened my eyes.



Standing over me was a bearded figure wearing a rumpled business suit. I did not recognize the other man from the scaffold. To my pain-blurred mind, he was just a foreigner in a dingy two-piece suit. Kasagi's men had been wearing suits and two of them had been foreigners. I couldn't remember, offhand, if any of them had been bearded.

It occurred to me that I had been taken prisoner.

I didn't stop to wonder why Kasagi would bother to kidnap me when it would be easier for him just to have me killed. It also never occurred to me to wonder why Kasagi would let me keep my katana under any circumstances. My horror at the thought of being captured was such that it pushed all rational thought clean out of my mind.

I reacted mindlessly.

Kicking the bedclothes aside, I vaulted to my feet. My right arm was too badly damaged to respond to my commands, so I transferred the katana to my left hand. My left arm lashed out, blade flashing.

I'm not as good with my left hand as I am with my right. This discrepancy is what saved Jigen's life.

It also helped that Jigen had half-way decent reflexes of his own.

The bearded man ducked back with a yelp of surprise and, instead of parting his head from his shoulders, I separated the crown from the top of his hat.

"LUPIN!" he screamed, scrambling backwards madly. "LUUUUPIIN! GET YOUR ASS IN HERE!"

I lunged after him, staggering drunkenly. There was no poise, no grace, no poetry in my attack. I was an enraged animal, trying to kill, hoping to die, unwilling to live with the supposed shame of capture.

The bearded man grabbed up a chair and tried to hold me at bay. Chips of wood flew as I started to demolish it.

"LUUUUUUPIIIN!! SHEE-IT!!!"

The wooden chair seat splintered. I gathered myself for a final assault.

"TOMATTE!! KINJIRU!!"

The suddenness and absolute authority of the order startled me and caused me to misstep. While I was off balance, the bearded man struck me with what was left of his chair. I fell on my injured shoulder and the pain became more than my rage and my horror could fight. I collapsed, dropping the sword. The bearded man kicked it away from me.

He needn't have bothered. I couldn't get up. I wasn't strong enough to endure this kind of pain... yet.

"All right," said somebody, "what happened?"

The bearded man gestured at me angrily. "I just stopped to check on him!" he panted. "I heard him groan and went over to see what I could do! The crazy little shit attacked me! Look what he did to a perfectly good hat!"

He poked his fist through his decapitated headgear.

There was a man standing in the doorway of the room, backlit by the light outside. I saw a smile cross his shadowed face. "That hat's older than you are, Ji," said he. "It's about time you got a new one."

"Hat schmat! It could have been my head! I told you we shoulda taken the damn sword away from him!"

"Ah!" replied the shadow-man, "but that is precisely what we won't do!"

By this time, I had recovered enough to sit up. I sat with my back against the wall, cradling my agonized right arm in my lap. Silent and miserable, I waited.

The shadow-man walked toward me slowly, knelt slowly and picked up my katana gently by the hilt. He smiled at me.

"Aw, crap!" exclaimed the bearded man. "You're not gonna give it back to him...?"

"That is exactly what I'm going to do," said the shadow. "Think about it, Ji. We both might have reacted the same way if we'd awakened in a strange place, groggy with pain, our last memories of someone trying to kill us. Seen in that light, he's not such a crazy little shit, neh?"

"Ji" only grunted. He moved away as the shadow-man edged closer. When he was close enough, the shadow-man offered the sword back to me. "I believe this is yours..."

I studied him, now trembling violently. I was naked except for my loincloth and the bandages plastering my upper body. It was still winter and the room was very cold. Carefully, I took the sword from him.

"Domo..."

"Do itashemasite," the shadow-man said easily, seating himself cross-legged on the floor. "I am called Lupin. This is my associate, Mr. Jigen Daisuke. You are..."

"Ishikawa Goemon."

"Good evening, Mr. Ishikawa. Forgive me, but you're not looking at all well. Wouldn't you like to get back into bed?"

Actually that sounded like a lovely idea, but I was still hesitant to trust. "You don't work for Kasagi?"

"Who, please?"

I was stunned. "You don't know..."

"I'm afraid I've never had the pleasure. --Jigen, I think we can stand a little more light on the subject. If you please..."

"Jigen" grunted again and flicked on the light switch. I was momentarily blinded when the overhead lights came on. I blinked, willing my eyes to adjust, and looked up. What I saw made me gasp.

"You're the Frenchman!"

"Lupin" spread his hands graciously. "So desu! I am recognized. And if I am recognized, then you must realize we are all friends here. There's no need to be defensive."

"Friends!" Jigen snorted. "Sure!"

But what I realized was that I had failed utterly. Kasagi Itzo was still alive and, by now, he was hopelessly out of my grasp. My attempt at Vengeance was a complete fiasco. My grandfather would remain unavenged.

I sagged against the wall, pain and cold forgotten. I looked at the blade glittering so softly in my hand.

It was as though this Lupin-person could read my mind. "Don't you dare..."

I looked up. "Nani?"

"I think you understood me. I saved your life. I risked my own life doing it. I think that gives me some say in the matter and I hereby forbid you to waste that life unnecessarily! Wakarimasu ka?"

"H-hai, wakarimasu. But, Lupin-sama, I failed. Kasagi Itzo killed my grandfather! He stole from my family! It was my own stupidity that allowed him to escape. He's still alive and free!"

"That only means he'll be ripe for plucking later," Lupin argued. "You didn't fail, Goemon, you just went back to hell to regroup. You'll have another chance at Kasagi, and this time he won't see you coming. He thinks you're dead. That's a marvelous tactical advantage, is it not?"

My pulse quickened! It certainly was!

"If a grievous wrong has been done you," Lupin continued expansively, "then I think we can be prevailed upon to help. In the meanwhile, however, you should take care of that shoulder. I suggest you put that skinny little butt of yours back in that bed before Jigen exercises his baser instincts on it."

Jigen Daisuke glowered at me imperiously. "And it would give me a world of satisfaction, too!"

I still remember how warm and good those blankets felt! I remember how gentle Lupin's hands were as they changed the dressing on my shoulder. And I remember Jigen running back and forth, all the while growling like an offended bear, as he got the supplies Lupin needed. Their help was immediate, tender and unquestioning.

Of course, they had no idea at the time that their "stray puppy" would decide to stay, and stay he did no matter how loud or logical their arguments against it. I had decided they were stuck with me.

And it didn't matter one damn that they were thieves. They had given me aid and comfort when I felt I had no one to turn to. They appeared and suddenly I wasn't alone anymore.

God, but that shoulder hurt, though!

It still does sometimes, when the weather's raw and damp.

I don't mind it. In that dull ache is a great deal of satisfaction. It taught me to endure. It taught me to persevere. It taught me even more than my Master did what it means to be bushido!

Pain is a great Teacher.

Albeit a pitiless one.

Pain...

...

...

It hurts.

God, it hurts!

It hurts, Lupin!

I can feel it!

That means I did it! I'm going to win!

....

...

..

.

"...Lupin...?"

My voice sounded terrible! All dried and broken, like a split reed or a drum whose skin had cracked. All the same, I was glad to hear it. That dry, brittle sound meant I had endured.

I was.

I basked in the glow of that thought for a while, then I began to wonder where I was and life became more complicated.

I was lying on my back in a bed that was spongy-soft. My left arm was taped to a padded board. A snaking tube ran up that arm to a needle buried in the pit of my left elbow. Another tube ran into my nose through my right nostril and down the back of my throat. Assorted sticky pads clung to various portions of my chest and my midriff felt like it was encased in cement.

(There were two additional tubes violating my body, but delicacy forbids I be too specific about them.)

All around me, pain lay like the waters of a too-warm bath. Numbing my mind, dulling me, making it difficult to concentrate. I recognized the

pain, welcomed it, then bade it sit in a corner out of the way while I concluded my business. It was reluctant to do this, at first, but eventually it conceded.

"...Lupin...?"

There were various sounds around me. I heard them as I strained to hear an answer to my feeble inquiry. There were whirs and thrums and wheezing noises. There was also this annoying electronic blip that kept throbbing in rhythm with my heart.

Soft, grey light filtered through the antiseptic starkness. The faint reek of cleansers, dressings and bodily fluids was subtle and insidious.

"...Lupin...?"

"What's this now?" a woman asked, her unfocused person looming into my line of sight. With a little effort, I brought her into focus. She was middle-aged, portly, and had a face kind as a Madonna's. She felt my forehead gently. "Welcome back to the world of the living."

"...H-how long...?"

"About forty-eight hours. Don't worry about it. There's time enough. How do you feel?"

"...Weak..."

"That's only to be expected. Is there any...?"

"...Is Lupin here?... C-can I talk to him...?"

"Who?"

"...My friend... The man who brought me here..."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but you were admitted by a Mr. Zachary Taylor."

That took a minute to register. When it did, I smiled just a little.

"...Of course. I'm sorry. I'm a little confused..."

The firm, dry fingers caressed my forehead again. "Of course you are," she soothed. "You've had a nasty couple of days. You can speak to your friend, if you like, but only for five minutes. We don't want you tiring yourself out."

"...Thank you..."

There was an interval of time. A tiny void. I spent it resting quietly.

A door opened somewhere beyond my line of sight and Lupin came into view. He was wearing a plain, blue workshirt with its sleeves rolled up, a pair of worn blue jeans and camper's short boots. He also had this ratty-looking straw cowboy hat he kept fumbling with and a plethora of artificial freckles painted across the bridge of his nose. The only thing he didn't have was straw stuck behind his ears!

He approached my bed and smiled tentatively and I saw he was wearing a fake gold jacket on one of his front teeth.

"Remember," called the nurse. "Only five minutes."

"Yes'm," Lupin responded circumspectly, ducking his head in a brief, abject bow. "I'll keep it short."

I heard the door click and Lupin turned back to grin at me. I attempted to appear as inscrutable as possible. (This isn't easy when you're lying flat on your back in a critical care ward!) "...You look like a perfect idiot..." I told him.

Lupin bowed graciously. "Thank you, sir! I always endeavor to do my best! May I say you're looking simply awful? Just like a soggy dish-rag."

"...You're too kind..."

"Please allow me to convey the best wishes of our mutual friend. Walt Mitty says 'hello'."

"...Walter Mitty? How charming..."

"Shall I tell him Yoshi Toranaga returns his regards?"

"...Walt's outside...?"

"Yes, but the nurse told us only one of us could go in. She didn't want you exposed to too much excitement. You're a little delicate yet, my friend."

"...Then you may certainly give Walt my regards. Tell him I'll see him tomorrow..."

Lupin's silly grin faded then, and he put a hand on my shoulder. "Ari-gato gozaimashita, Goe-chan," he whispered.

It was the first and only time Lupin had ever called me by my "baby" name. I hadn't even known he knew it. It sent a ripple throughout my soul like a pebble falling gently into a still pond. My tranquil pool sparkled momentarily with ringlets of light.

".....Do itashimashita, Lupin-sama.....Uh, katana wa doko desu ka...?"

"Walt's been taking care of it for you. He wanted to give it back to you personally, once you got out of here. We didn't think the hospital staff would understand..."

"...Hai...Domo..." I paused, fighting the heavy pull of my weakness and fatigue. "...Who....Who was it, do you know...?"

"It was the wino from the airport. His name was Samuel Dettrick. That's all I know about him at the moment. Mr. Dettrick himself was a little uncommunicative when we caught up with him. You see, Jigen nailed him ten seconds after he nailed you. I'll find out who arranged it, never fear. I'll save you a front-row seat."

"...Domo..."

Lupin said nothing at all for the space of about a minute. His hand stayed gently on my shoulder.

I felt a thickness grow in my throat. I swallowed it. My epiglottis grated on the tube in my gullet. "...A-are we apt to have any trouble with the local authorities...?"

"I seriously doubt it," Lupin replied. "The resident sheriff is a comfortable old sod who's had the job for thirty years and who's thick as your average brick. By the time he's figured out enough to send for Zener-gater, as he would put it, we'll be long gone."

"...They have not charged Walt...?"

"No, they decided it was self-defense."

"...Good..."

"Very good," Lupin agreed, "since we're stuck where we are for the moment. We can't risk moving you, my friend. You're as fragile as spun-glass."

"...So..."

"Does it hurt much?"

"...Not as much as last time..."

Lupin's smile returned. He squeezed my shoulder once, gently, then let go. "You recovered from that, you'll recover from this," he said more to comfort himself than reassure me. "You're going to be just fine."

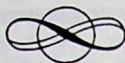
A door clicked open. "Your five minutes are up, Mr. Taylor," the nurse called. "We'd better let him rest now."

"Yes'm," Lupin agreed, ducking quickly back into character. "You take it easy, Yoshi. Hear? I'll be back to see you t'morrow. Bye now."

"...Sayonara --y'all..."

That almost stopped Lupin dead in his tracks, but he recovered nicely and turned to grin at me. Decorum intact, he saw himself out.

The second he was gone, I realized I was utterly exhausted. I dropped back to sleep effortlessly as the nurse prattled and probed with expert gentleness. The water closed over my head and I was gone.



I met the comfortable old sod of a sheriff Lupin had told me about. His name was Theodore Boswell and he was a guileless, rotund man with sagging jowls and a tendency to misplace things. He came to see me the next day and I immediately felt sorry for him. As far as Lupin was concerned, the sheriff was completely outclassed. While I lay abed, utterly helpless, Lupin appeared before Sheriff Boswell in no less than four separate disguises and the poor clod didn't suspect a thing. This would have continued, only Jigen put a stop to it. The effort involved in trying not to laugh was exhausting me and aggravating my sutures.

Poor Sheriff Boswell didn't have a prayer of successfully investigating my shooting, though he gave it a good college try. I knew it was only a matter of time before he called in the Federal Boys. If he did, and if the FBI deigned to become involved, then we would have to discreetly vanish. The FBI knew who we were and they were unlikely to be put off by such ridiculous aliases as Zachary Taylor, Walter Mitty or (yeah-gods!) Yoshi Toranaga.

About ten days after my wounding, Sheriff Boswell came to see me again. I was out of the critical care ward by this time and in a regular hospital room. All the tubes had been removed from my body and I had been placed on a liquid diet. I had shed about twelve pounds during the course of my trauma and I looked (and felt) rather like a sculpture by Giacometti.

When Sheriff Boswell arrived, I was engaged in playing chess with old "Walter"... who was cheating shamefully every chance he got! I was sitting up in bed, propped by the self-elevating mattress since my belly muscles were still too tender to accomplish this strenuous feat on their own.

"Konnichi-wa," I told the sheriff.

"Afternoon, Mr. Torernager," Boswell responded. "You, too, Mr. Mitty."

"Good afternoon, Sheriff Boswell!" Jigen replied expansively, slyly brushing his rook out of danger with the edge of his sleeve when he thought I was distracted. "What brings you here?"

(I was content to let Jigen have that rook. In my next move, I was going to butcher his queen... and he didn't know it.)

"I just gotta couple questions to ask yer," Boswell continued, taking out a small spiral notebook and fumbling through it. He found the page he wanted and studied it myopically, patting his pockets with his free hand. "Hmph," he observed. "I seem to have fergotton my pen. I'll see if'n they got one at the nurses' station."

"Don't bother, Sheriff," Jigen volunteered. "Take mine."

Boswell accepted the unassuming ballpoint. "Thank yer, Mr. Mitty. That was kind of yer." Boswell paused to make sure the ink was flowing, grasping the pen by its nib, the tip of his tongue just visible with the effort of his concentration. In the interim, Jigen advanced his bishop and placed my king's knight in danger.

I studied the move, satisfied. (Jigen plays excellent poker, but he plays wretched chess.)

"Now, Mr. Torernager," Boswell began, satisfied that the pen was

working, "would you happen to know a Mr. Georgio Spettazi?"

Actually, yes, I did. Mr. Spettazi was the lieutenant of a man named Andre von Knowlin, one of the officers in the International Diamond Cartel. Needless to say, no member of the Diamond Cartel liked Lupin III. Mr. von Knowlin specifically did not like Lupin because Lupin had once relieved Mr. von Knowlin of an armored truck supposedly carrying five million dollars in gemstones. As it turned out, the truck contained only diamonds of industrial quality. This caused the Diamond Cartel much consternation and left Andre von Knowlin with a lot of explaining to do.

But I saw no reason to tell Sheriff Boswell about all this.

"So sorry," I said, "I do not know the name. Should I?"

"They found that name scrawled onner piece of paper in a cabin rented by Sam Dettrick. I was jus' wonderin' if it would mean anything to yer."

Sam Dettrick, of course, had been my assailant.

Sooo. It was von Knowlin who wanted Lupin dead. How very, very interesting....

"So sorry," I repeated, and glanced at Jigen. If these conclusions had occurred to me, then they would have occurred to him. He was familiar with von Knowlin and the whole diamond fiasco. I could see the lines of tension tightening around his mouth. Jigen was an excellent poker player, but I decided not to take any chances. I swept my king's bishop out of nowhere and demolished his queen.

"What?!" Jigen bayed, totally distracted. He studied the board more carefully and added, "Damn!"

Sheriff Boswell glanced at the chessboard without any real comprehension, then turned back to his notebook. "Can yer think of any reason Mr. Spettazi would want to harm yer or any member of yer camping party?"

A warning light started flashing in the back of my mind. "How would I know that?" I countered smoothly. "I don't even know the man."

"Oh, that's right," Boswell mused, still studying his little notebook.

"I guess that makes 'her academic, huh?"

"Huh?" Jigen wondered, looking up from the chessboard.

"Nothing, Walt," said I. "Keep trying."

"One last question and I'll leave yer be," Boswell promised. "The nurse said yer kept callin' fer someone when yer woke up after surgery. Someone called 'Loopen'. Could yer tell me who that is, please?"

The warning light flashed brighter. "Certainly," I replied. "Only it wasn't 'Loopen'; it was 'le Loup'. That's French. It means 'the Wolf'. We call Zachary that, sometimes. He has a fair reputation with the ladies."

"Yer speak French?"

"A little."

Boswell's jowls pouched forward as he pursed his lips. "I guess that shouldn't surprise me," said he. "Yer speak awful good English fer a Jappernese."

"Many Japanese speak English," I replied coyly. "It's taught in public schools."

"'Zat a fact?" Boswell wondered.

About this time, a nurse entered my room pushing a metal cart. On the cart was a basin of water, several pastel-colored squeeze bottles and an assortment of sponges and towels. Under the cart was a medium-sized aluminum box. The nurse herself was a somewhat horsy girl with a headful of curly blonde hair and too much mascara. She smiled prettily at Sheriff Boswell.

"You'll have to excuse us now, Sheriff," Lupin sang. "It's time we had

our bath."

"Isn't that basin a little small for both of you?" Jigen asked off-handedly.

"You behave yourself, Mr. Mitty!" Lupin scolded. "Or I won't let you stay to finish your game!"

"I'll be goin' along," Boswell agreed politely, pocketing both the notepad and the pen absently. "That's all I need fer right now. Yer have a good day, Mr. Torernager. Take care of yerself." He grinned at Jigen. "And I'd watch myself if I were yer, Mr. Mitty. He's got yer checkmated in three more moves."

Every alarm in my soul started to howl in unison! That was absolutely right and he hadn't taken more than ten seconds studying the board!

I remained utterly composed until the good sheriff left my room.

When he was gone, I saw Lupin sag a little. "Why do I have the very clammy feeling we've just been had?"

"Because we've been had!" Jigen replied. "We've just been faked right out of our jocks!"

"And our shoes, too!"

"Walter," said I, "he's got your pen..."

"So what? It was just a cheap ballpoint."

"Aren't your fingerprints on that pen?"

"Oh, shit..."

Lupin leaned forward, batting his outrageous false eyelashes at me.

"Mr. Toranaga, have you got any plans for this evening?"

"None that I know of."

"How'd you like to fly to Mexico?"

"That sounds like a champion idea."

"Should we move him?" Jigen wondered. "He still looks a little sickly."

"We haven't got much choice now," Lupin decided, removing his wig. "I imagine it will be all right if we're very careful." He pulled the false eyelashes off and looked at me. "You behave yourself, Goemon," he said in Japanese. "I mean it. You let us do the work on this one."

"Hai," I agreed.

Lupin went over to the door and listened carefully. When he didn't hear anything, he slipped out of his dress.

Jigen removed the aluminum box from the cart-shelf and opened it. From it, he removed a white labcoat and a stethoscope. He shed his own dingy green jacket and battered hat, then, removing a makeup kit from the box, he greyed his temples and beard. After this, he pulled on the lab coat and hung the stethoscope around his neck. He completed the ensemble with a pair of very respectable horn-rim glasses.

He peered at me myopically as Lupin slid into a pair of black pants and an orderly's jacket. "I do believe my patient has taken a turn for the worse," said he.

"Yes, Doctor," Lupin agreed, straightening the points of his new uniform and stepping into a pair of men's shoes. "What do you suggest?"

"I think we ought to take him down to X-ray... stat."

"Absolutely, Doctor!" Lupin concurred, descending on me with a roll of white gauze. "You never can be too careful with head injuries!"

Jigen packed away the discarded clothing and began converting the cart into a stretcher while Lupin proceeded to wrap my skull (and most of my face) with the white gauze. By the time the stretcher conversion was complete, I looked like the Mummy from the neck up.

"Ready, Doctor?" Lupin asked.

"Yeah," Jigen replied, jockeying the stretcher into position. "Careful now..."

Tenderly, both of them lifted me out of bed and laid me on the stretcher. They covered me with blankets.

"Okay?" Lupin asked me.

"Hai," I replied.

"One last thing," Jigen said, slipping the box back onto the lower shelf of the stretcher. He reached up under that shelf and removed something wrapped in silk. Carefully, he unwrapped this object and slid it under the blankets next to me. I felt the familiar smoothness of its lacquered curve and was soothed. I'd felt like only half a man without it.

"Domo arigato, Ji-san," I whispered as my hand closed on my sword.

"You're welcome," Jigen responded, smirking. "But don't get any fancy ideas. You're still on the injured list."

"Hai."

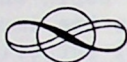
Our preparations complete, Lupin wheeled me toward the door. Jigen paused long enough to make sure the immediate coast was clear, then he motioned Lupin forward. With cool authority, Dr. Jigen Daisuke accompanied his patient and the attending orderly down to X-ray... which just happened to be on the same floor as the ambulance bay.



At about six that evening, the hospital operator got a strange phone call, informing her that the hospital staff could find their missing ambulance at a local private airport. This came as quite a surprise to them, since they hadn't known the ambulance was missing. A greater surprise awaited them at that local airport. Under the seat on the passenger side was a metal attaché case. Inside that attaché case was a great deal of money. Enough money, as it happened, to pay all my hospital bills. Also in that attaché case was a neatly-lettered note that read as follows:

To whom it may concern,
I am a thief, not an ingrate,

Cordially
Lupin III BBS, MBS & SOB



The western coast of Mexico was lovely that time of year. It was lovely most times of the year and nourished a prosperous tourist industry. Parts of it were very public and parts were very discreet and private. Naturally, we chose the latter.

Lupin rented a house south of Acapulco with a handsome private beach. It was there I finished my convalescence. To effect a full recovery took the better part of two months. --Not that anyone minded. The weather was fair, the tequila was plentiful and the señoritas were sufficiently winsome. Lupin and Jigen caroused as I drowsed peacefully, laying plans for Mr. Spettazi and his erstwhile boss, who had threatened the life of my leader and damn near punched my lights out! When I was well, I would consult with Lupin as to the disposition of von Knowlin and Company, but for the moment I was content to wait. I could be an exceptionally patient man when the situation warranted.



One morning in particular during my convalescence, I lay on a beach-lounge shaded by an umbrella while Lupin frolicked along the tide-line with one of the bikinied bunnies who lived two houses over and Jigen sat sunning next to me. Jigen was reading a copy of National Geographic, dressed in bathing trunks, a Hawkeye-Pierce-style flowered shirt and (of course) his disreputable hat. I set aside my Agatha Christie novel to study him obliquely.

"Jigen?"

"Huh?" he replied without looking up.

"Arigato gozaimashita."

That made him look up. "What for?"

"For knowing me as well as you do."

Jigen grinned then. "You're welcome," said he. "I figured you were too stubborn to concede an argument. I'm just glad I was right."

"So," I agreed, closing my eyes and laying my head back on the pillow. "I would like to take this opportunity to apologize for ruining your hat."

I'm very sorry about it. Desperately sorry. *Wakarimasu ka?*"

"Forget it," Jigen said, and the lights went out. Something had been dropped over my face. Something that smelled of sweat and cigarettes. I opened my eyes and saw a splotched silk lining. It was Jigen's hat.

Lifting the hat, I glanced at Jigen. He had gone back to reading his magazine, bareheaded. And he was smiling, just a little.

I smiled, too. Just a little. Placing the hat on my head in the proper manner, I returned to *Death on the Nile*.

Like the man said: It is a difference of opinion that makes horse races. It is pleasant to note that (occasionally) both horses win. This doesn't settle the argument, but it does give the participants a feeling of satisfaction. And that can be better than winning.

I think so, at least.

Sayonara... y'all.

end

Literary Credits:

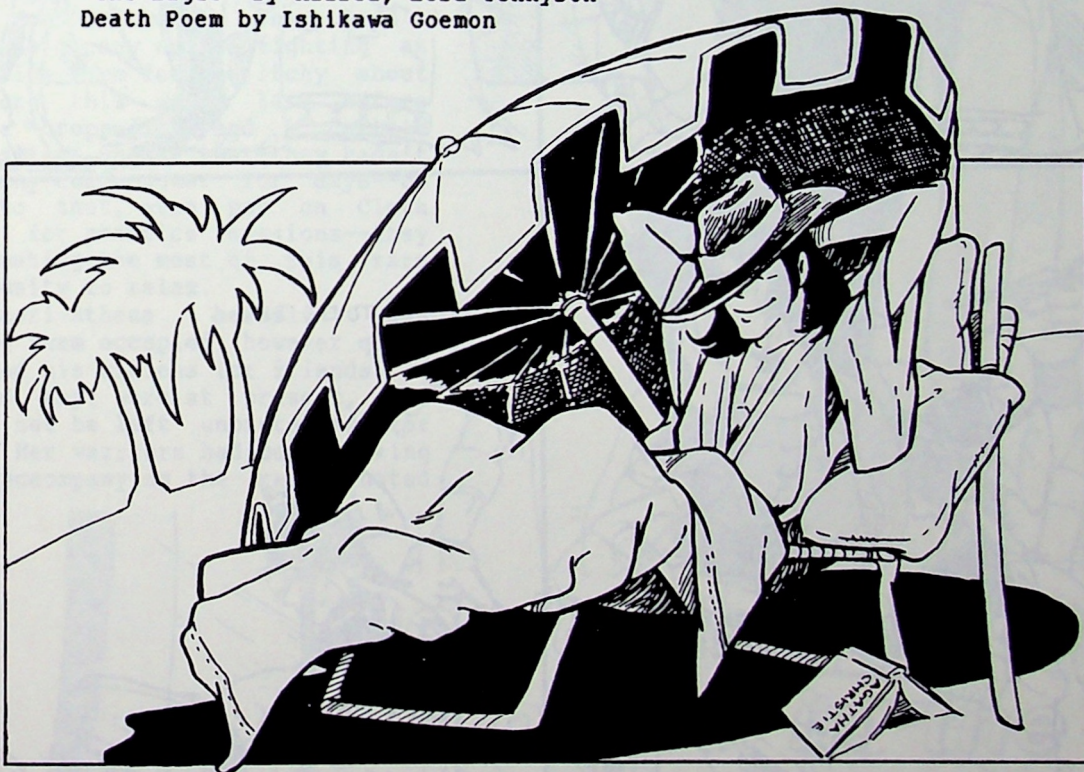
"Phantom's Theme", from *Phantom of the Paradise*

lyrics by Paul Williams

Opening and closing philosophy by Mark Twain

"The Eagle" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Death Poem by Ishikawa Goemon



'VOLTRON County': EPISODE TWO

FIRST THING'S FIRST, KID...
YOU NEED SOMEBODY TO
HANDLE THE PAPERWORK...



I TOOK THE LIBERTY OF HIRING
YOU A NEW PERSONAL SECRETARY.
THIS IS BAMBI RABINOWITZ...
— SAY HELLO TO THE NICE
PRINCE, BAMBI...




LIKE, I'M PLEEZED
T'MEETCHA, FER
SURE ...



I'M GOING TO BE ILL...





The five Bronze Saints who made up Athena's bodyguard were having a fairly restful week. They hadn't needed to do any actual fighting at all. Aside from feeling itchy about how long this would last before Trouble cropped up, and a certain subconscious unease that they hadn't used any cosmo power for days--or come to that, even put on Cloth except for practice sessions--they were making the most of this rare opportunity to relax.

Saori-Athena herself was keeping them occupied; however quiet Ares and his minions (or friends, if he had any) were at present, she could not be left unprotected for long. Her warriors had been taking turns accompanying the reincarnated

Don't Use Your Cosmo in the Kitchen

by Jay Felton

CA '90

goddess in such pleasant pursuits as tennis, horseback riding and swimming.

This afternoon Seiya, Hyoga and Saori-Athena returned from the sports club comfortably tired, and Saori went up to her room to change. The two Saints went in search of their probably-bored comrades, after debating whether they should take some food supplies along. The Kiddo mansion was large, after all, the grounds larger, and Seiya in particular was doubtful as to whether a search should be attempted without some kind of sustenance; it could take hours, he argued. Hyoga overruled him, though, and as it turned out the pair quickly heard and tracked down sounds of life coming from a nearby drawing room.

Shun and Shiryu were sitting side by side on a couch, watching TV and looking not merely bored, but depressed.

"What's with you guys?" Seiya demanded after they'd greeted him and Hyoga with a marked lack of enthusiasm. "Things too quiet for you?"

"Worse than that," Shiryu gloomed. (He would have grumbled, but he knew that was something a Noble Hero never did.) "Don't say you've forgotten. It's Ikki's turn to cook tonight."

Seiya and Hyoga groaned in unison as they joined the other two on the sofa. "Beans on toast, or bacon and eggs?" Hyoga asked in the tones of one steeling himself to hear the worst.

These two menu choices had been quickly established as being the limits of Ikki's culinary abilities; as he'd pointed out defensively, training for Sainthood didn't include any more cookery lessons than "what to eat if abandoned in the desert/jungle/Arctic" and even that hadn't included any practical work in his case. He'd been too busy, like all the students in the notorious "death camp", generally surviving and evading the extremes of his sensei's wrath. It was his friends, though, who now suffered the consequences at least once a week since Saori had had the bright idea of insisting all her Saints share the household chores and take turns preparing the evening meal. It was in the interests of comradeship, she declared, ignoring their grumbles and--after the system had been in operation for a couple of weeks--their pleas that putting Ikki in the kitchen was guaranteed to have the opposite effect, that is, to make everyone else desirous of killing him.

If it was baked beans for dinner, all the Saints knew they would be left hungry no matter how much ice cream or fruit they stuffed down for dessert; Ikki, accustomed to the deprivations of Death Queen Island, invariably underestimated the others' appetites under the delusion that beans were a filling food and a little went a long way. However, the likely alternative of a fried meal (even if it wasn't burned beyond recognition) meant that Saori would throw a tantrum, accusing the cook of trying to ruin her figure and/or complexion. Both prospects were distinctly uncomfortable to contemplate.

"It's a surprise," Shun offered now, with some trepidation. "He said it was something special, but he wouldn't tell me what."

"Special? Ha! He couldn't cook anything special if he tried," scoffed Hyoga. "Not unless Saori's been giving him lessons in secret."

"That's an idea," Seiya mused thoughtfully. "Only, can she cook? Tatsumi always does lunch, when we're in that is, and we all get our own breakfast."

The notion of Athena-reincarnate working over a hot stove did seem rather ludicrous; after a few moments' consideration, Shiryu voiced the unanimous conclusion when he stated positively, "No, I don't believe Saori is experienced in the culinary arts."

"Come to think of it," Seiya remarked, ignoring the reflexive heckling from Hyoga about his, Seiya's, thinking, "there were a lot of recipe books on the table in the library when we came through there just now. Scattered, like someone had spent ages looking for something and left them all there when he'd found it."

"That sounds like Ikki," Shiryu said.

"And after lunch he went out shopping," Shun remembered. "Maybe he has come up with a really nice meal to make." His tone was hopeful; he always took his big brother's failures personally, aware that Ikki minded far more about letting his friends down than he was prepared to admit.

"It'll have to be good to make up for last week," Hyoga grouched, then sighed as Shun's green eyes glared hurt indignation. "Oh come on, Shun, you couldn't eat much of it that time either, even out of brotherly loyalty. Burnt to a frazzle, most of it, and Saori got mad enough to manifest as Athena right there in the dining room."

"Uh-huh," Seiya recalled somewhat dreamily. "That nearly made it all worthwhile, though--OOF!" Shiryu had driven an elbow sharply into the younger Saint's ribs. "Aw, come on, you gotta admit she's gorgeous when she's like that...." Seiya trailed off, feeling himself blush, as his companions all burst into laughter.

"Just remember what she is, Seiya," Shiryu warned gently. "You mustn't think of her so disrespectfully, you know." He shook his head at the Pegasus Saint in mock despair.

"Yeah, I know. But anyway, what about this 'surprise' of Ikki's? Shun, didn't he give you any hint at all?"

"He bought French loaves. I couldn't see what else," answered the green-haired youth, shrugging apologetically.

"Why don't we find out?" Seiya suggested next. "I could go to the kitchen for some juice and cookies or something."



Needless to say, it wasn't that simple. Seiya found a large notice decorating the door between hallway and kitchen; rather crookedly affixed with Scotch tape, it read in bold, no-nonsense characters, "OFF LIMITS TO EVERYBODY. STAY OUT OR I THROW YOU OUT!!" The signature was a rough but expressive sketch of a Phoenix.

Seiya read this with some anxiety, and decided to test the atmosphere by cosmo. He did try to be subtle, but by the time his extra sense had perceived that Ikki was in the mood that matched the notice in hostility, the powerful Phoenix Saint had equally perceived Seiya was there.



The Pegasus Saint hastened away from the door as he both sensed and heard Ikki approach it from the other side. He couldn't help glancing back, though, as the door was furiously jerked open. Ikki appeared in the doorway, glowered at him, made a wordless snarling noise and pulled something out of the pocket in the ridiculous chef's apron he was wearing. Seiya prepared to duck, but Ikki merely used the object--a pencil stub, possibly--to cross out the word "THROW" on his notice and write "KNOCK" instead.

Seiya decided he could wait till dinner time; he didn't really want any cookies after all.



The incipient eruption of his temper somewhat diffused by his amendment to the warning notice, and by the sight of Seiya making such a rapid retreat from the area, Ikki returned to the task at hand with renewed enthusiasm. It was mainly the vagueness of the recipe instructions that infuriated him; how large was a "large saucepan", for instance, and what stove setting constituted "moderate heat"? The requirement for "separated eggs" had also puzzled him greatly--eggs, after all, did not come in strings like sausages--until on reading further he discovered the egg yolks had to be processed differently from the whites.

That was when he'd begun to wonder if this really was the "relatively simple, but elegant" dish the cookery book claimed....

It was too late to turn back, though. Determined to impress the others, Ikki refused to admit defeat, even when persuading the egg yolks and whites to part company proved just as tricky as he'd feared. Several eggs had been wasted in the process, to his despair until he realized that, put aside, they could be used for breakfast omelets and the like.

Next, some experimenting with the available baking dishes and a measuring jug enabled him to discover which dish was the right size (and got the kitchen rather wet, but he had more important things to worry about than that). The food processor took care of reducing the ham and cheese to pulverized shreds, since Ikki had no idea how to chop ham finely or grate cheese coarsely. He wasn't even sure that what he had was Cheddar cheese; it looked like just the ordinary yellow sort to him.

Now, "scalded milk" meant boiled, he supposed; he duly set some in a pan to heat while he greased the baking dish and, carefully following instructions, melted the remaining butter in the largest saucepan he could find. "Stir in the flour" was clear enough, but "do not allow to brown"? How was he to stop it? For that matter, what dire consequence would result if it did?

While he was contemplating this mystery, the milk boiled over. A disgusting stench as it burned on contacting the hot stove alerted Ikki to the fact and, cursing violently, he snatched the pan away. Luckily he spilled no liquid on himself, but he was left wondering if enough now remained in the pan. It would have to be enough, he decided; he wasn't going to risk the dangerous feat of boiling another lot.

Meanwhile, of course, the contents of the other pan were turning brown as fast as they could. To be exact, they'd set solid on the bottom. With a yelp of sheer frustration, Ikki panicked and turned the heat off completely, then discovered with relief that this for once was exactly what he should be doing. Maybe adding the milk--the next indicated step--would salvage the



mixture. Its color couldn't be helped--if anything, he thought, it ought to improve the revolting pinkish appearance of the mangled ham and cheese.

Despite much energetic stirring and cautious heating, the so-called sauce remained obstinately lumpy. It was thick all right, but the recipe book demanded that it should also be smooth. Ikki stirred and pounded the lumps till his arm ached, reflecting all the while that this wasn't quite the same as pummeling Ares' Saints into the ground. Suddenly he realized he was falling behind schedule, and would have to press on to the next stage. Adding in the egg yolks seemed to help a little, and he decided the result would do.

Beating the egg whites, though again it used his muscles in unaccustomed ways, proved extremely satisfying. When he'd finished--remembering to add the salt and all the other arcane powdered ingredients--the white froth was certainly stiff. Ikki felt quite pleased with himself as he tipped the cheese and ham mixture into the sauce, trying not to wince at the color.

But the next line of the recipe deflated his spirits again. "Fold egg whites into sauce with a metal spoon." Fold? How? What kind of a stupid instruction was that? Or maybe he hadn't made the stuff stiff enough (he made a mental note not

to try saying that out loud, or not quickly) after all; it wasn't solid enough to fold! How could anyone fold something so, well, gloopy? Yet he was sure that beating the pristine white froth any more would have no effect. "Argh!" He hurled the book across the room, spent a few minutes swearing at the contents of the various pans and bowls, then stomped over to pick up the aggravating volume again. Perhaps the illustration of the final product would provide a clue.

Finding his place again, he realized that the instructions referred to putting only one "mixture" into the baking dish and the nice, golden-brown topped substance in the photograph seemed to be of the same consistency all over. So presumably everything just had to be mixed together. "Fold" must be a technical term for "mix". Conscious of time still passing, Ikki threw

everything to be combined into the food processor and set it going once again. That ought to do the job thoroughly. No messing about with metal spoons for him.

Ikki turned to preparing the accompanying vegetables, hoping his dim conviction that they cooked more quickly than the main dish was correct. When they were ready in the pan he returned his attention to the food processor. The contents seemed to be well blended now; they looked rather less fluffy than the beaten egg whites had on their own, but Ikki supposed that was only to be expected. The mixture was still quite encouragingly thick, and he wasted no time spooning it into the dish. He loaded it into the oven, set the timer, reminded himself on no account to open the door too soon, and began seeking out the book's advice on green vegetables....



Saori came down for dinner in one of her favorite gowns; white, sweeping the floor, it suited her to perfection and she knew it. Peaceful days and weeks were so welcome that she liked to celebrate by wearing her best clothes. It was a pity she couldn't get her loyal Bronze Saints into complementing evening wear, but they had to be ready to assume Cloth at a moment's notice and she supposed armor over a tuxedo would be rather uncomfortable. Come to think of it, it would also look ridiculous....

Saori-Athena had not forgotten that Ikki was making dinner tonight, but she had faith in her Phoenix Saint. Surely this time he would bring off something that would restore the others' respect for his domestic abilities.

She found the other four youths already waiting in the dining room; they stood up politely as she entered. A glance at the mantelpiece clock while she was sitting down on the chair Shiryu held for her told her dinner was going to be late....



They had been waiting some fifteen minutes when, still in his apron and looking a little flustered, Ikki came through the door from the kitchen. He carried a large tray containing soup plates, a butter dish and the French bread Shun had seen earlier, all of which were swiftly distributed around the otherwise-ready dining table. The chef then disappeared kitchenward again, to return with a soup tureen and minus the apron. His fellow Saints were startled into silence as a splendid aroma reached their noses--chicken soup, and clearly delicious! Ikki noted their reactions with barely-concealed pleasure as he served them--it was working. The others didn't realize it was a packet soup, prepared at the last minute because Ikki had almost forgotten it completely; if any of them suspected, they didn't care.

The first course was almost successfully over when Shiryu, seated nearest the kitchen, remarked diffidently that something seemed to be... overcooking. Ikki, who'd been blushing under Shun's admiring, openly adoring gaze and the others' sincere compliments, leapt to his feet in dread and hurried to investigate.

The vegetables had boiled dry; a few pieces were stuck to the bottom of the pan and starting to blacken. How dare they! Anger simmered in Ikki as he savagely added more water to what remained edible, discarded what did

not. Just when everything had been going well....

Then Ikki started as the buzzer for the stove timer sounded forth. Leaving the vegetables momentarily to their own devices, he peered through the glass of the oven door and saw--absolutely nothing. Said glass was covered in steam condensation.

Well, the book had emphasized "Serve immediately," with good reason. Therefore Ikki dished up the vegetables, certain at least that they were sufficiently cooked, and took them to the table, clearing away the soup while he was about it, before examining the main dish any further.

If the soufflé sank now he was going to scream.

He took an oven cloth with which to handle the hot dish safely, steeled himself, opened the oven door and reached inside.

Ikki didn't believe his eyes. The thing hadn't even risen properly! But it had to! Dismayed beyond speech, Ikki found his rage rising past all control....



The other four Bronze Saints, and Saori-Athena herself, sensed the cosmo energy building at once. With a single unspoken accord the heroes rose from their places and hurried toward the kitchen, but by then it was too late. A fierce orange glow, together with a brief wave of heat, leaked out around the edges of the door and they heard the sound of mighty, immortal wings beating, followed by a minor explosion.

The five outside the door looked at each other in alarm.

"I'll go in," Seiya declared rashly, started forward again.

"Not on your own, you won't." Hyoga was right behind him.

The two of them advanced into the kitchen to find a scene of devastation which would have cheered the heart of Ares himself--assuming he had one. Ceiling, walls and floor were decorated impartially with lumps of a strange yellowish substance which, judging from the smell, had been some combination of eggs, cheese and ham. Steam as from a forgotten boiling kettle filled the air (due, unknown to the younger Saints, to Ikki's earlier liberal use of water for measuring purposes) and a stench of burning cloth came from the countertop where a cracked, slightly blackened soufflé dish rested amidst dying flames. Even the fireproof oven cloth hadn't withstood the full power of a wrathful Phoenix Saint.

Ikki himself was standing amidst the carnage in full Cloth, fists balled, eyes flashing blue sparks. The fiery light of his cosmo faded around him and the others saw that he had not escaped the flying, egggy debris himself.

"Gee, who won?" Seiya asked, awe-struck.

"It wasn't our dinner, that's for sure," Hyoga choked, torn between exasperation and mirth.

"One more word, Hyoga," Ikki threatened, "and you are dead!" He spoiled the effect by wiping soufflé from his nose.

Even so, the Cygnus Saint decided in favor of a strategic withdrawal from the room, a motion seconded by Seiya.

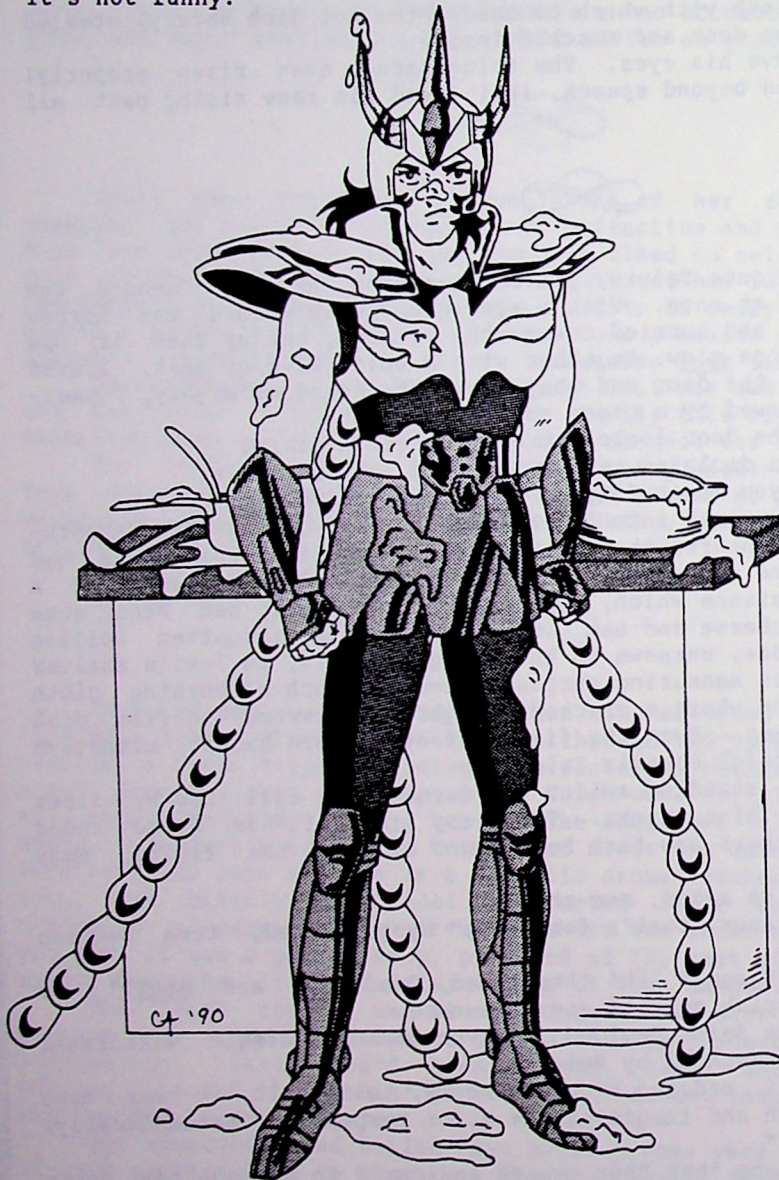
Still fuming, Ikki ordered his Cloth away, telling it it was more trouble than it was worth and imagining the armor responding sarcastically, "That's right, blame me!"

No sooner was it gone than Shun peeked anxiously in through the doorway. "Niisan, are you all right?" he exclaimed, emerald eyes even wider

than usual in his concern.

"Do you want a straight answer?" Ikki growled, and Shun, gulping in fear, withdrew promptly and shut the door behind him.

Ikki could still hear his brother through the door as the Andromeda Saint told the others, "I, uh, I think he's going to clean up the mess himself." Ikki also heard, muffled but unmistakable, Seiya's inimitable giggling as Hyoga, now laughing openly, tried to account to Saori-Athena for the state of the kitchen and the lack of dinner. The resulting general merriment was interspersed with Shun's indignant admonitions to "shut up, it's not funny."



A little warm feeling stole through Ikki's fury at that. At least he could rely on his little brother for sympathy. Then this sweet assurance was crushed out of existence as, upon Seiya making some remark which ended "... all over his Cloth, and his nose!", the cross wail of "It's not--" became "...yes it is!" and Shun joined helplessly in the others' laughter.

More miserable now than angry, Ikki revolved slowly on the spot, forcing himself to survey the extent of the disaster. There didn't seem to be any structural damage to the room, that was something. When he finished turning round, he found Saori-Athena standing there shaking her head at him.

"Oh Ikki," she said despairingly. "I know you meant well, but--" she gestured around the room. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he mumbled shamefacedly. "It

hadn't risen, you see, and I tried to make it, only I guess I just got mad...."

"Ikki--" The goddess incarnate's voice became stern. "--you know I've warned you about this before. Never use your cosmo in the kitchen! Look what happens."

He nodded sadly. "Hey, are they.." He waved towards the dining room. "Are they angry about dinner and that?" If so, Ikki wasn't leaving the kitchen by that route!

"We got some soup, at least," Saori reminded him. "I don't think they'll kill you."

"Phew. Okay, I'll get cleaned up, then fix all this," Ikki promised.

He emerged from the fatal kitchen with Saori to find Seiya, Shun and Hyoga all either looking tactfully in other directions or whistling in I'm-not-really-here innocence. There was no Dragon Saint, however.

"Where did Shiryu go?" asked Saori as the sound of the mansion's front door slamming was heard by all.

"It's okay, ma'am, there will be food very shortly," Seiya assured her. "He went out to get take-out."

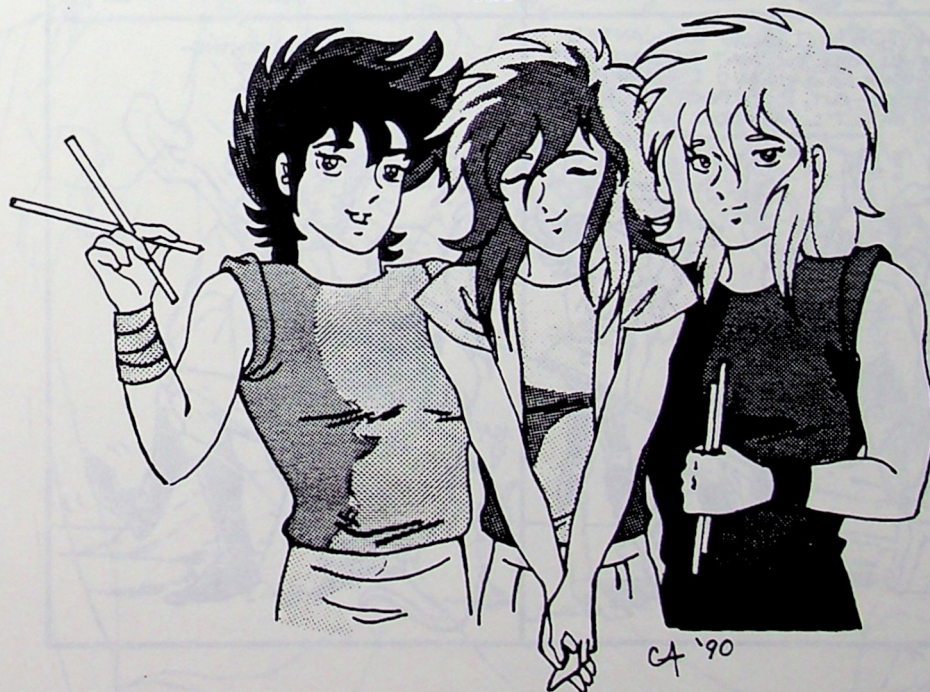
"Oh, that's fine," Ikki commented with forced cheerfulness. "Sorry about the soufflé, guys," he managed to add.

After one chuckle, instantly suppressed, from Seiya's direction, they all told Ikki not to worry about it, they'd eat well on what Shiryu was bringing.

"Oh, what is that?" the Phoenix Saint inquired, more for the sake of maintaining friendly relations than out of real curiosity.

"You need to ask?" Hyoga said, and Shun and Seiya joined him to chorus, "Chinese!!"

end



'VALTRON County': EPISODE THREE

I'M GLAD YOU WERE ABLE TO RECONCILE WITH YOUR FATHER, PRINCE LOTOR. HOW IS IT GOING?

I'M NOT SURE YET, HAGGAR



BY THE WAY... THIS IS BAMBI RABINOWITZ. MUGWART HIRED HER AS MY PERSONAL SECRETARY...

LIKE HI, WITCHIE-POO!



OH, 'TORY... I KNOW YOU WANTED THE REPORT ON THAT ROBEAST, BUT I BROKE A NAIL AND I WAS SO TOTALLY BUMMED-OUT, I FERGOT TO TYPE IT. I'M OFF T'LUNCH NOW. SEE YA.



IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO...?

SEND FLOWERS.



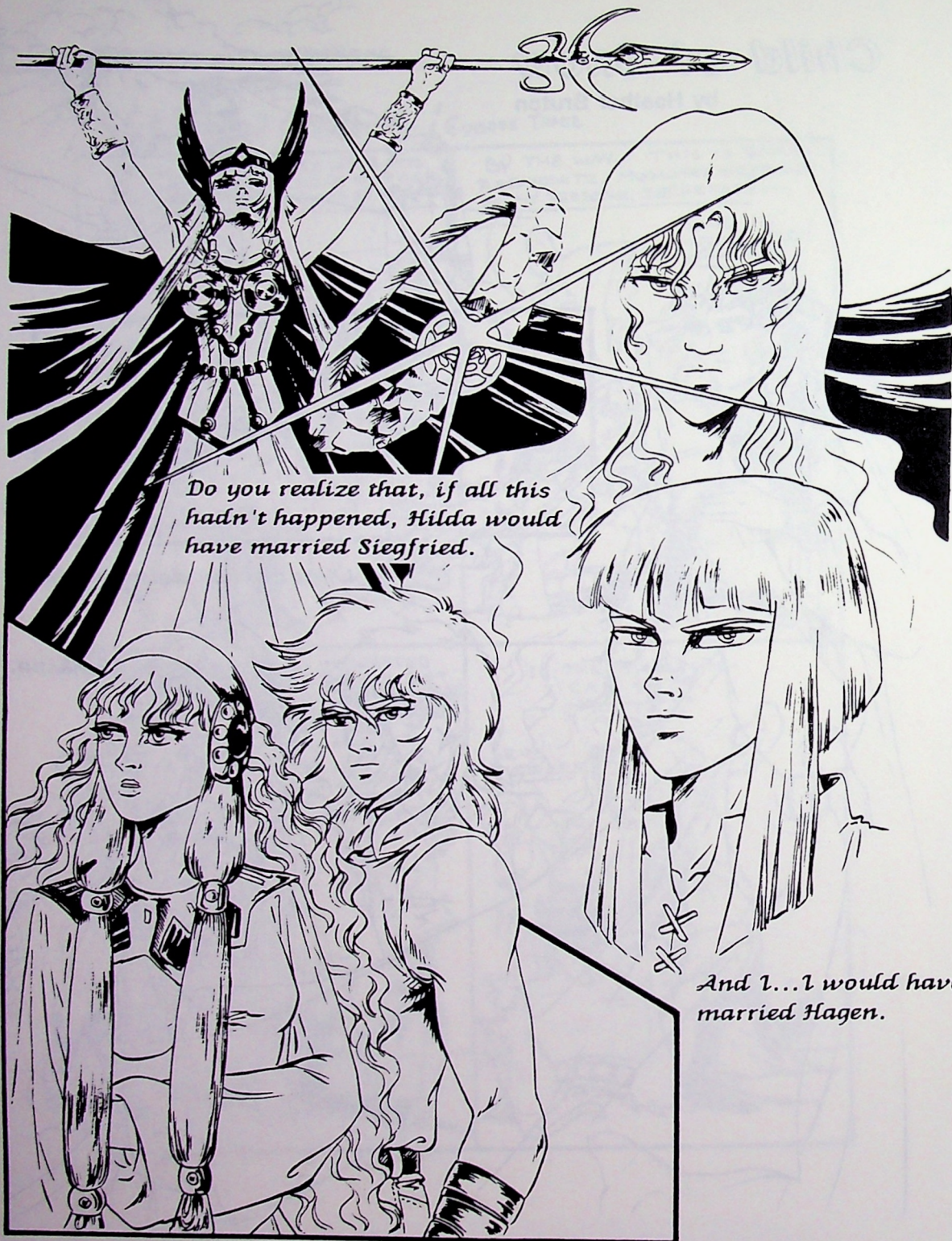
Child of Snow

by Heather Bruton



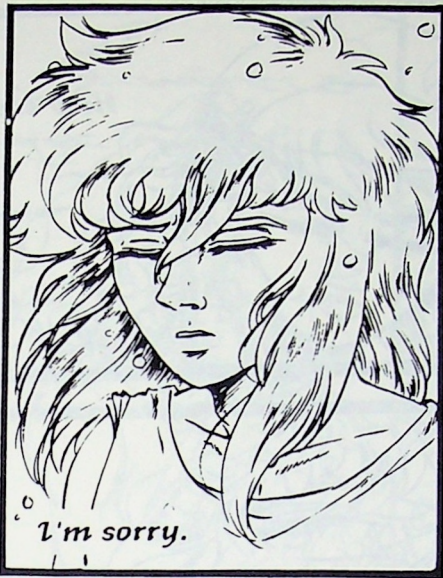
What are you doing out here?

Thinking.

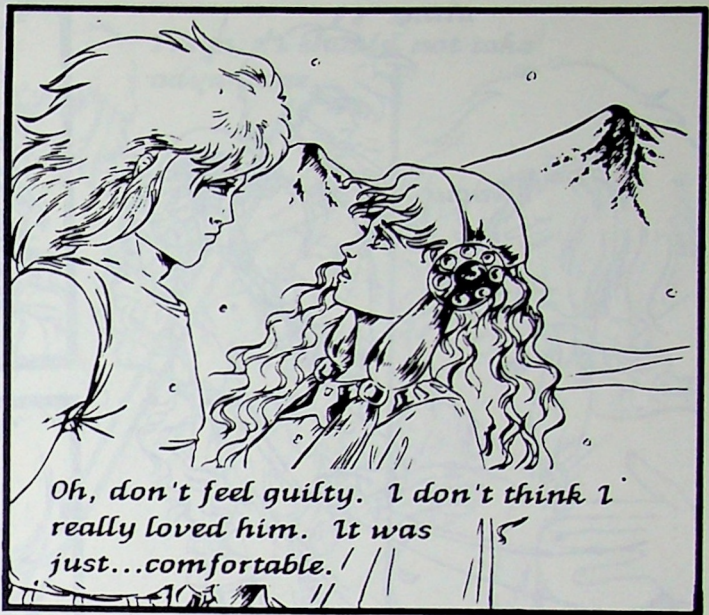


Do you realize that, if all this
hadn't happened, Hilda would
have married Siegfried.

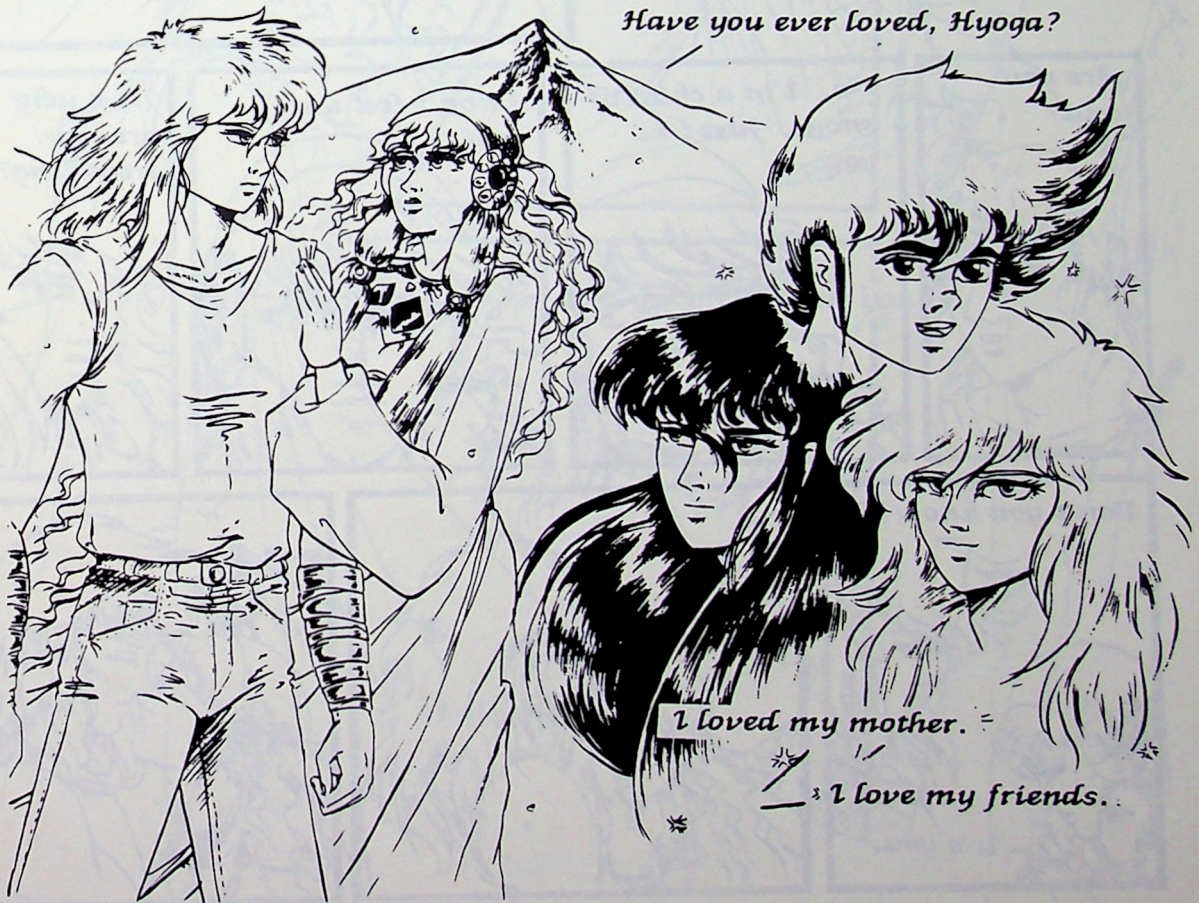
And I...I would have
married Hagen.



I'm sorry.



Oh, don't feel guilty. I don't think I really loved him. It was just...comfortable.



Have you ever loved, Hyoga?

I loved my mother.

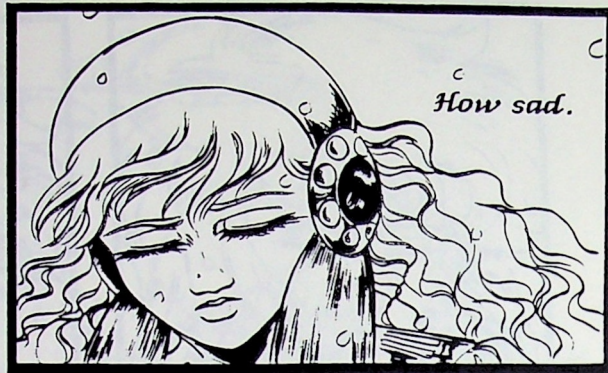
I love my friends.

*That's not the same
thing.*

I know.



How sad.



*Are you
cold?*



*No. I'm a child of
snow. Just like
you.*



*I don't feel the
cold.*



*Then why
are you
trembling?*



Don't you know?



— It's you.









*You are like the snow.
You're so beautiful.*



So are you.



We should be getting back



*And what if I don't want
to?*



*We can't stay out here
forever.*





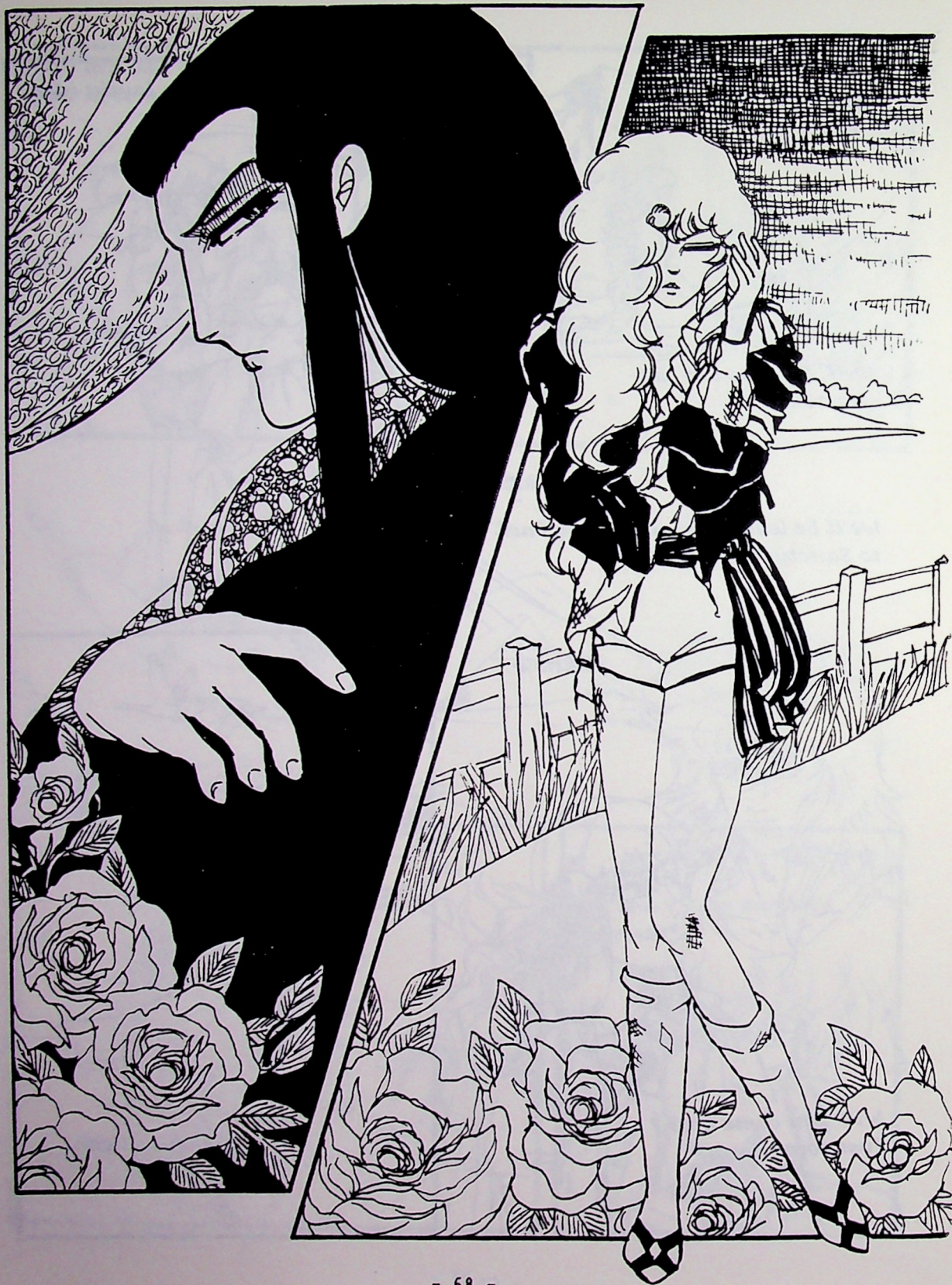
Well, I guess it's not practical.

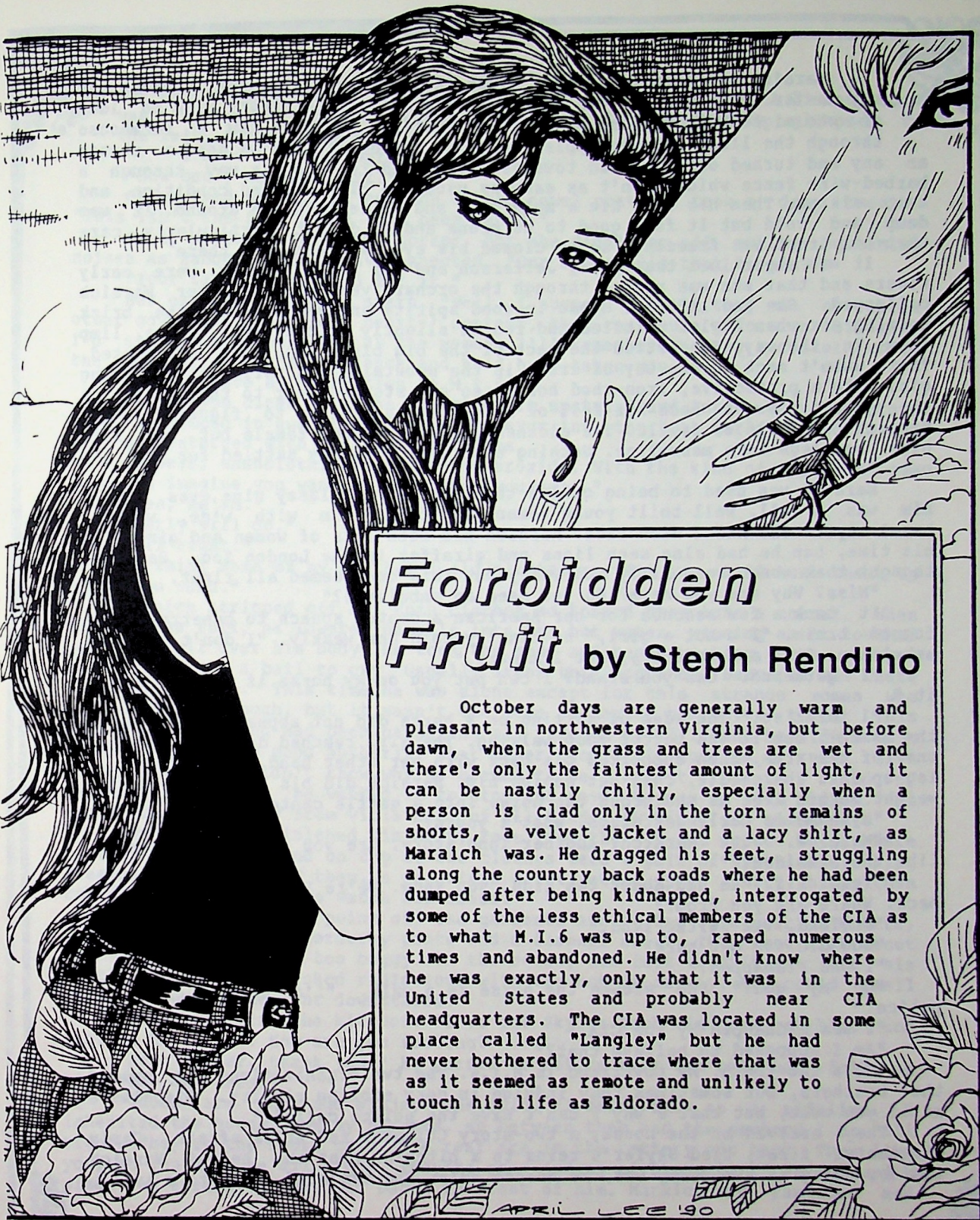


We'll be leaving soon. Going back to Sanctuary.

I know.







Forbidden Fruit by Steph Rendino

October days are generally warm and pleasant in northwestern Virginia, but before dawn, when the grass and trees are wet and there's only the faintest amount of light, it can be nastily chilly, especially when a person is clad only in the torn remains of shorts, a velvet jacket and a lacy shirt, as Maraich was. He dragged his feet, struggling along the country back roads where he had been dumped after being kidnapped, interrogated by some of the less ethical members of the CIA as to what M.I.6 was up to, raped numerous times and abandoned. He didn't know where he was exactly, only that it was in the United States and probably near CIA headquarters. The CIA was located in some place called "Langley" but he had never bothered to trace where that was as it seemed as remote and unlikely to touch his life as Eldorado.

APRIL LEE '90

Maraich had been raped many times in his young life, but it never got any easier. This time he was in completely strange territory with no idea of who might help him, so he moved on instinct. When he saw a farmhouse through the lines between apple trees, he decided it was as good a chance as any and turned off the road towards it. He had to ease his way through a barbed-wire fence which wasn't as easy as usual in his battered condition, and keep walking. Then his foot hit a mole hole and he fell to the ground. It was damp and cold but it felt good to be prone and he didn't particularly care that his front was freezing, so he closed his eyes and remained there.

It was sheer luck that Carly Jefferson and her horse, Skyler, were early risers and that she was riding through the orchard very shortly after Maraich collapsed. She had left her house in good spirits and was enjoying the brisk morning air when Skyler whinnied and reared slightly at the sight of the limp form in the way. She patted the neck of the big blue roan and dismounted. There wasn't much in the way of crime in the mountains and Carly was a strong girl with a protective, iron-shod horse, so she stepped over to the person on the ground, swept back her fall of brown hair and tried to figure out if Maraich was male or female. The clothes and hair seemed female but the slim hips and legs were masculine. Nothing else was, so Carly settled for calling out, "Miss?"

Maraich was used to being called that and opened glassy blue eyes. Above him was a tall, well-built young woman who studied him with wide, worried hazel eyes. She had a nice face. Maraich had seen lots of women and girls in his time, but he had also seen lions and giraffes in the London Zoo. Bancoran thought that women were silly and weak, but this one seemed all right.

"Miss? Why are you here? Do you need an ambulance?"

It took a few seconds for her American-accented speech to penetrate his fogged brain. "I'm not a girl," he finally told her weakly. "I don't need an ambulance. It's a long story, but I'm hurt."

"I gathered. Can you stand? I can put you on my horse if you're up to it."

"I think so." The idea of sitting on a horse did not appeal to Maraich at the moment, but it was better than walking. The girl reached down and grasped one of his arms, then supported his back with her other hand. She gave him a leg-up into the saddle, then sat behind him. Maraich did his best to keep his weight on his legs as she urged the horse into a gentle canter.

"My name is Carly Jefferson. What's yours?"

"Maraich. Just Maraich. Another long story. Are you a real Jefferson, like the president?"

"Yes, sir. He had about ten kids, you know. We're Virginians from way back. Where are you from?"

"England, via Switzerland."

"How did you get here?"

"I was kidnapped."

"Oh my god." She slowed the horse to a walk. "I'd better call the police."

"I was kidnapped by the CIA."

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"It's the truth. My boyfriend is M.I.6. The two organizations are called the brothers, but sometimes they indulge in gory sibling rivalry. Disbelieve me if you want, but that's why I can't have the police called."

They arrived at the house, a two-story Colonial red brick affair. Carly dismounted first, tied Skyler's reins to a hitching post and helped Maraich inside. Crazy as his story was, he needed help. She assisted him into a small,

oak-paneled foyer where a staircase led up to the bedrooms. A living room was to their right and the dining room and kitchen could be glimpsed to the left, through the hall.

"I need a bath," Maraich stated.

"How badly are you hurt?"

"I've had worse." He held on to the newel post and took a deep breath.

"This isn't the first time I've been raped."

Carly's face reflected horror, but she didn't go off making squeamish noises as Bancoran would have expected. "Our agents did that to you?"

"Your tax dollars paid for it."

Her expression became stern. "Well. I suspect that if they can overthrow other governments at their hearts' content, they can abuse a foreign citizen. I'd still like proof, but at the moment I'll remember that my ancestor wrote the Declaration of Independence and he'd have taken you in."

"I can prove my connection to M.I.6."

"After you clean up." She escorted him upstairs and into a bedroom with a bath. He limped in and started running water into the tub. Carly went down the hall and returned with things in her arms.

"Towels, washcloth, and hydrogen peroxide. With the kind of injuries you have I'd imagine you want to tend them yourself."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Carly will do."

"All right."

"I think some of my brother's old clothes may fit you. I'll hunt them up while you wash."

Maraich stripped off his torn clothes and tossed them into a corner. When the tub was full, he lowered himself into the hot water, wincing as it touched raw flesh all over his body. He took the soap and began washing, then stopped and curled into a ball to cry. Usually after this happened, Bancoran was there to comfort him. This time he was alone except for this strange woman who seemed kind enough, but it wasn't the same as having his lover there. This kind of awful thing had been happening all through his life and he didn't know why. He had it on good authority that other people did not, as a rule, live like this. He didn't know why he seemed to be a magnet for this kind of violent event but he wanted it to stop and never happen to him again. He wanted some security from violation, of all kinds, physical and emotional.

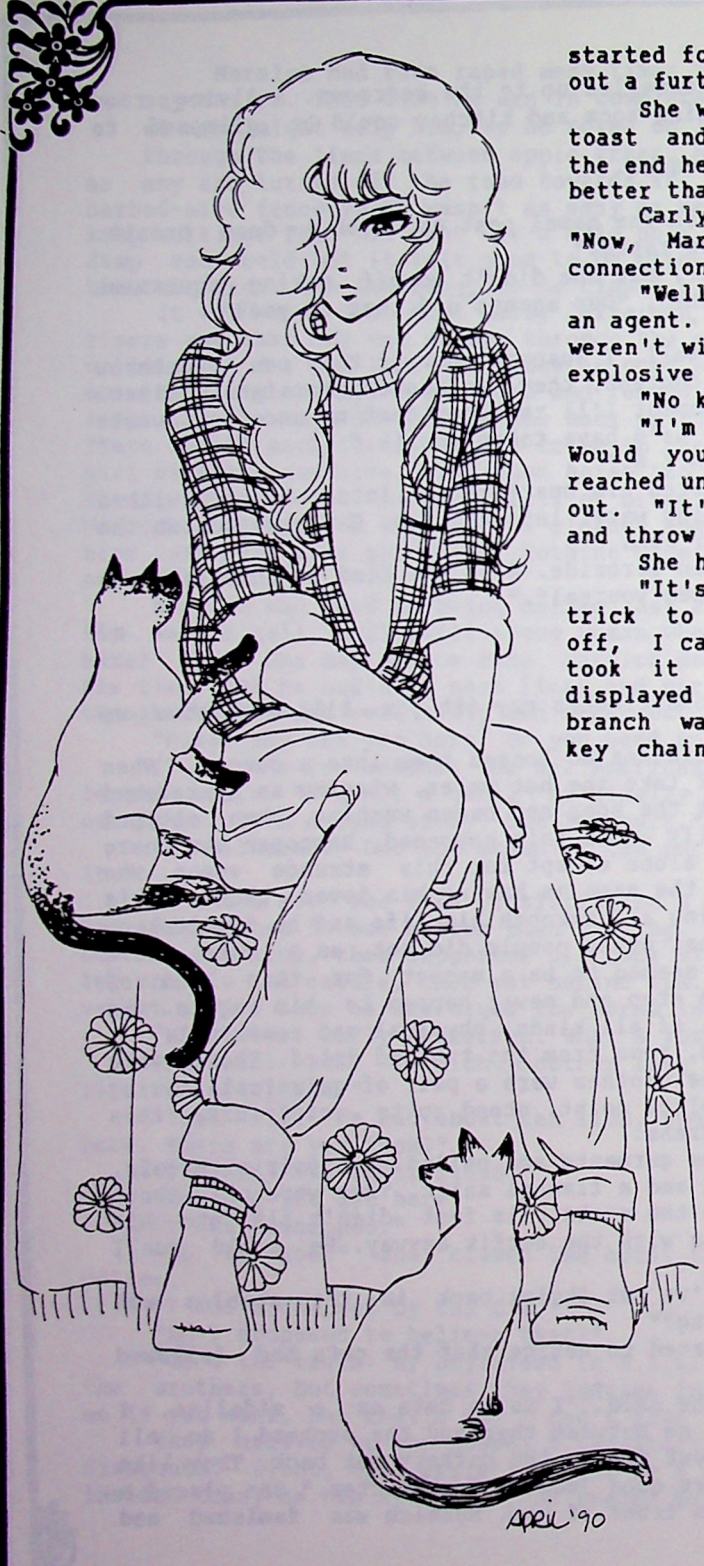
Eventually he finished his bath, rose from the tub and dried. There were clothes on the bed, and on top of the clothes were a pair of quizzical-looking Siamese cats. One of them, a chocolate point, stood up to sniff him, then curled up on a pillow to watch him dress.

He shooed the seal point off the garments and pulled on a pair of briefs, T-shirt, sweat socks, corduroy pants and a flannel shirt. They were all about the right length, but too baggy. In the socks, his feet didn't fit into his little shoes which looked ridiculous with the outfit anyway. He could smell food cooking, so he went downstairs.

Carly was in the kitchen. "I've put Skyler back in the stables and started breakfast. How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thank you." He turned to notice that the cats had followed him. "Who are these?"

"Those are Yuki and Ninja," she said. "I raise cats as a sideline. I inherited the house from my parents, so between them and the orchard I do all right. They're the house cats. The rest are in the cattery out back. They like you, so you must be all right. They're good judges of character." She placed a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon in front of him. Maraich was famished and



started forking the food into his mouth without a further word.

She watched him demolish three pieces of toast and a large glass of orange juice. At the end he commented, "Thank you. Those were better than mine, certainly."

Carly sat down with a big mug of coffee. "Now, Maraich, I'd like you to prove your connection with M.I.6."

"Well, my boyfriend, Jack Bancoran, is an agent. I live with him in London. And if I weren't with M.I.6, where would I have found explosive earrings?"

"No kidding."

"I'm not. They're filled with plastique. Would you like to see me set one off?" He reached under thick red curls and pulled one out. "It'll detonate if I squeeze it right and throw it."

She held the thing dubiously.

"It's safe at the moment. There's a trick to it. If you don't want me to set it off, I can just show you the plastique." He took it from her hand, unscrewed it, and displayed the grey, putty-like material. "Q branch was quite proud of that one. I had a key chain that gives off nerve gas if I whistle the first bar of Rule Britannia and explodes if I whistle Smoky Violet. The CIA agents took it away from me. Don't feel too bad, Carly. I know some very nice, moral CIA agents too, but there are factions, you must understand. They all want power. It's human nature."

"I believe you. Now, how do I get you home? Your parents must be worried about you."

"I'm an orphan."

"Well, Bancoran then."

Maraich considered. A little worrying might do Ban good. The previous week, Maraich had discovered him in flagrante delicto with the boy who delivered their groceries.

"He worries when it suits him."

"Doesn't sound like much of a boyfriend. Everything about you is very weird, to say the least."

"So I've heard, but I've led a sort of reverse sheltered life."

April '90

I've been protected from the normal." Ninja jumped up onto his lap. "This is all very new to me. I've never sat and talked to a girl. I've never been out here in America. It's very beautiful, with the woods and the mountains and the apple trees."

"Would you like to stay for a little while?"

Maraich stared. "You want me to?"

"I need help picking the apples. My brother is down in Charlottesville now and he's not coming back up. I'd have to hire out anyway. I'll trade you room, board and normalcy for some work. We'll keep it away from the eyes of Immigration and everything will be peachy. Is it a deal?"

"How long does it take to harvest apples?"

"About two months. Of course, I market them too. Some go to a bakery off in Washington but at least half get sold around here to the people from the DC area who drive out here on weekends for them."

"It sounds wonderful."

"Now, will you be calling Bancoran?"

"I don't know. Not yet. As I said, some worrying about me might do him good. He cheats on me unbelievably."

"Forgive me for saying this, Maraich, but it doesn't sound as if you two have a very healthy relationship."

Maraich got up to pour himself some more coffee. He had never particularly liked coffee, but it was contributing to his feeling suddenly more solid. "Well, when I met him, his idea of heaven was to have a different boy in his bed every day and two on Christmas since that's his birthday. We met about four years ago when he apprehended me. I was working for an organization that is sort of a diamond syndicate but had enough international repercussions to attract the attentions of M.I.6. He caught me and we've been together ever since, but I only use my--um--trade in Her Majesty's Secret Service." He recalled with a smile the time he had even convinced Ban's co-worker, 007, that he was a female agent by the name of Mary Ann Russell. He'd saved Bond's life too, but it hadn't made any difference when Maraich revealed that he had just been having a bit of fun and Station F was full of Marinerans anyway who thought the whole thing was hysterical. Poor Bond. After that spy base near Paris had been taken out and the head of Station F had suddenly turned into a chubby ten-year-old who had transformed instantly into Banzai Teddy and performed the Cock-Robin song, M had had to give him compassionate leave for a week. (*)

"So anyway, old habits are hard to break, I suppose. It hurts, though, that he can never be content with little me."

"Sounds as if he's got some massive insecurities and has to keep proving to himself that people want him." When Maraich didn't answer, she added, "Sorry, I was a psych major."

"It's all right. His mum sold him into prostitution when he was about fifteen when the family was in debt. However, I don't think she realized the miseries entailed, or what the horrible man who bought Ban was going to do to him when he got him home. So it was awful and he only stayed one night, then ran away and joined a kind of spy prep school. His roommate was the first one to get through the prickly exterior. I guess that would make a man insecure."

"That's horrible." Carly took a swig of coffee. "Has he ever looked for professional help?"

(*) See "From A View To A Kill" by Ian Fleming in his anthology of the same name. Sorry, Mr. Fleming, couldn't resist.

"Bancoran, the Bishonen-Killer? Of course not, it's his reputation. I don't think the idea has ever occurred to him."

"What about you? I mean, you've been together for four years, but you're not what I'd call long in the tooth."

"I was fourteen when we met."

"Fourteen!"

"Yes. You see, I ran away from boarding school when I was nine and was picked up by a nobleman who took me in and taught me to fight and do counter-espionage. I'd hate to think what my life would be like if he hadn't. This sort of thing probably would be happening a lot more often than it does."

Carly shook her head. "This is insane. I suppose this weird subculture you come from is why you were dressed the way you were when I found you?"

"It's the way I've always been dressed. I kind of like these, though. I don't think they're going to tear and I can get them dirty if I need to."

"I don't work around here in an evening gown."

"I have a few of those."

Carly shook her head. "Time for me to feed the cats. The old servants' quarters are outside and that's the cattery. I'll--"

"I'll go with you."

"You stay and rest."

"No, I'm fine. I couldn't sleep now if I tried. I want to be out in the sunshine and to think about something other than my problems."

"Well, it won't take that much out of you, I suppose. Friday's litter pan cleaning day and I bring in the covers from the cat beds to wash and the like. After I feed the cats I'm going to start apple picking. I want you to promise to go and lie down when you start feeling tired or depressed."

"I promise."

"Then let's go."

The smaller house had the front room converted into an office. From there, Maraich could hear the yeowlings of dozens of Siamese. Carly unlocked an inner door, beyond which were little rooms. Cat families stayed together in the larger rooms which were equipped with climbing trees, beds, litter boxes and food. Carly scooped out Eukanuba for them, stopping to stroke and talk to the animals. Maraich was set to pouring fresh water. This was done twice a day, he was informed, once in the morning and once at night, and she checked in during the day. Frequently, people would come in to buy the cats, which were a large source of income for her.

The horses were next. Skyler was in his stall and out in a paddock were a piebald gelding and a white mare.

"Those are Patchy and Genji," she told him. "I'll call them and you can give them their horse food."

She did and the two came over to their feeding trough. Carly held off on pouring out the plastic jug of grains until Maraich had petted the two and they had nuzzled him gently.

"Do they like me?" he asked.

"It seems so. As a matter of fact, that seems to be the four-footed consensus." She handed him the jug and he poured the food.

From there they went into the shack where she kept farm equipment. Carly drove out a small tractor, dismounted and shoved a Caterpillar cap down onto Maraich's curls. "That should keep you from getting sunburned. Now, get up here and take up that basket on the pole there. That's for getting the apples that are high up. The lower ones are easy. If they don't look wormy, and most of them won't, put them in the cart. Ready? Let's go."

They spent the next four hours going down rows of apple trees, stripping

each one of ripe fruit. Carly did a bit of climbing to reach them and Maraich became proficient at knocking the apples into the basket. It was almost like a game. The sun rose over the mountains and the valley in which the farm was located, so they both pulled off their heavy shirts and kept working in T-shirts. This gave Maraich his first close-up look at a woman's chest. Beneath the thin fabric, Carly's breasts were round and high and he discovered that he liked to look at them. He wasn't sure why, but figured that it must be that he was so used to Bancoran's flat, firm pectorals and that the difference was what held his eye. They were sort of pretty, though, very geometric.

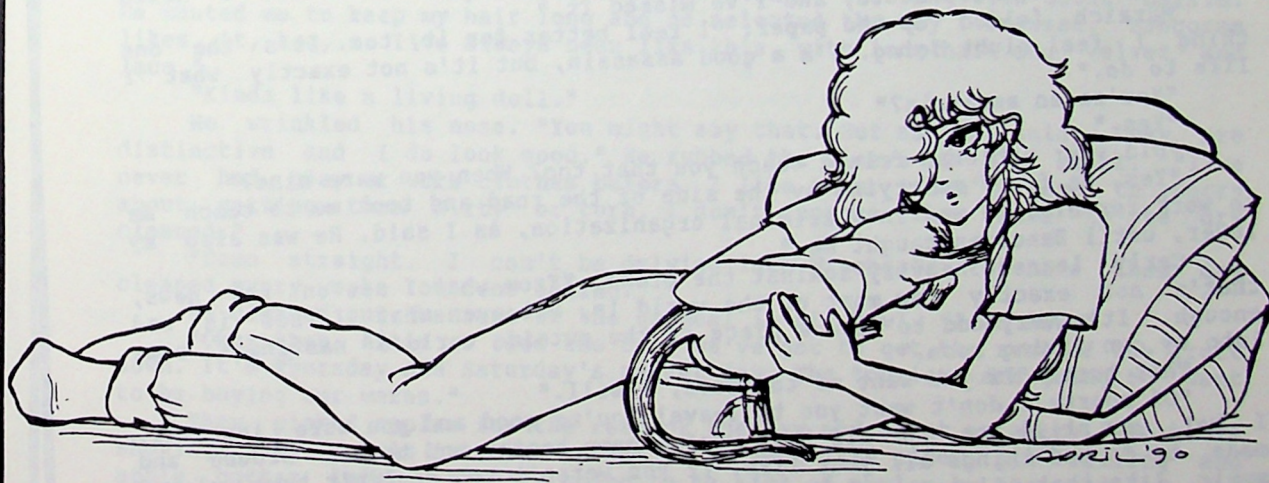
They stopped for lunch, for which Carly supplied ham and cheese sandwiches on home-baked bread. After that, Maraich found himself nodding off.

"Take a nap," she insisted.

He agreed. He hadn't slept since he'd been stolen from England nearly two days before and his whole body was feeling fatigue. "Don't let me sleep too long, though," he requested. "I want to get used to the local time."

"Okay. I'll give you an hour. Now scoot."

Maraich went upstairs as ordered and Ninja followed him all the way. He pulled off his shoes and socks and lay down under the covers with the cat curled by his side. Maraich closed his eyes and was asleep almost immediately, but the faces and violence of his captors came back to him and he woke up sweating, a scream ready in his throat. Bancoran wasn't there to hold him as was usually the case when Maraich awakened from one of his all-too-frequent bad dreams. The Ninja was still sitting on the bed and let out a cry of "Maul!" when Maraich looked at him. The boy picked up the cat and hugged it, for which he was rewarded by a loud purr. His fear left him. He was safe on this farm in the mountains and if anyone was going to want to come after him, they'd have to answer to Carly, which for some reason was a satisfying thought. He wondered if she kept weapons in the house.



He didn't want to go back to sleep, so he rose and began wandering through the house. There were three other bedrooms beside his, and the master one was Carly's. It was littered with magazines, books, and the bed was unmade. The other ones were unoccupied and the furniture was covered with sheets. Downstairs was a library and he spent a good long time in there. Many

of the books were antiques, old texts in Latin, Greek and French. Others were of more recent vintage and biographies and histories seemed to abound. Not a few were about Jefferson and Virginia. Some were about the American Civil War. There was little to no fiction and what there was were old English novels.

In a corner of the living room was a grand piano. Maraich sat down on the padded bench and looked over the sheet music on the rack. It was classical and hadn't been played in a long time. He opened up a piece of Bach and started playing. The piano was in tune and he soon lost himself in the music. All he saw were the notes on the paper and all he heard and felt was the music. It moved through him, cleansing him with its majesty and beauty, making him part of it. He was so engrossed in what he was doing that he didn't notice that Carly was on the couch behind him until he finished the piece of Liszt he was playing.

"That was glorious," she told him.

Maraich jumped. "Oh--it's you. I'm sorry I didn't ask before I touched the piano, but I didn't know when you'd be in."

She shook her head. "I was happy to see you playing it. My mother used to, but then she got cancer and before long was too weak. She loved that piano. That's why I've always maintained it. I knew she wouldn't be happy to know it was neglected."

"It's got a tremendous sound."

"I have someone come up from Richmond every six months or so to tune it. You're an artist, Maraich. I'm so glad that you did start to play it." Carly walked over to it and ran a hand gently over the wood. "It has so much music locked inside of it that I can't let free. I took piano lessons, but it was always such a chore to plunk out notes. I do better with living things. There's a ton of music sheets left in the seat and there's more in the library. Play it whenever you want. It's been a long time since I heard anything but recorded music, and I've missed it."

Maraich folded up the paper. "I feel better for it, too. It's the one thing I feel right doing. I'm a good assassin, but it's not exactly what I like to do."

"You're an assassin?"

"Yes."

"Did your nobleman friend teach you that too? When you were nine?"

"Yes. He found me crying by the side of the road and took me to teach me to work for him. He was in a criminal organization, as I said. He was also my lover, until Bancoran caught me."

Carly leaned heavily against the piano. "From what I see on the news, that's not exactly how most of the world is, but even what I see is bad enough. It's very odd to have a piece of the outside world's nastiness come into my own living room."

"That hurt. If you want me to leave, I will."

"Of course I don't want you to leave! You're good and you were innocent. I bet you still are, for all that you've been beaten and handed around and made to do bad things all your life. If you weren't you couldn't have played music like that. I'm sure of it, and the animals wouldn't like you. You need time here."

Maraich had a sudden thought. "Carly, you don't ever leave this farm, do you?"

"Sure I do, but I only go as far as Winchester. I've never had any desire to go anywhere else."

"You've never wanted to see London, or New York, or other mountains, or

the sea?"

"No. especially not London or New York. Those are bad places. I went to University of Virginia in Charlottesville and was a nervous wreck, so I quit after two years. There were always drunken parties, and rapes, and thefts, and you've said more than enough to confirm that that's what goes on out there. You seem to have been in a hurricane of it, but it never happens here."

"So you stay in your nest, afraid to go out."

"I have all I need."

Maraich couldn't argue. At the moment, he too wanted to stay where it was safe. Still, there seemed to be something very wrong with never foraying out into the outside world.

As he lay in bed that night, Maraich pondered whether or not he should have the decency to call Ban. It was early morning in England and he would not have gotten up for work yet. Maraich had a nagging feeling that if he did phone, the telephone's ring would interrupt Ban and some other boy whom he had found for comfort. No. He would let him sweat a bit. Besides, he liked the simple work and open spaces of this place and he was wanted. It was very nice to feel protected. It was strange to be living like other boys, wearing clothes he could get dirty, talking to a woman, in a place where Patalliro wouldn't find him--he hoped. It felt good to be normal for a change.

"Should I cut my hair?" he asked Carly the next morning at breakfast.

"I don't see why. Just tie it back. We aren't using any heavy mechanical equipment where it might get caught."

"I mean, other boys don't have long hair. Not most of the ones I've seen."

"Well, don't cut it just because everyone else does. I think it's pretty and very distinctive. What made you grow it that long?"

Maraich smiled sadly. "Everyone else I know, starting with Count Larkin. He wanted me to keep my hair long and he selected the way I dressed. Bancoran likes it, too, so I've always been like this, with long hair and velvet and lace."

"Kinda like a living doll."

He wrinkled his nose. "You might say that. But as you said, they are distinctive and I do look good." He rubbed the sleeve of his shirt. "I've never had play or work clothes before. I like them. I don't have to worry about getting them dirty or torn. I don't suppose they have to be dry cleaned."

"Damn straight. I can't be driving into Winchester to have them dry cleaned every week. You done eating?"

He cleaned out the rest of the oatmeal in his bowl. "I am now."

"Okay then. After we feed the cats we've got to get the rest of the fruit down. It's Thursday and Saturday's market day. The tourists are going to want to be buying our wares."

They picked apples for the rest of the day and spent an extra few hours shoving some bushels into the cellar to be made into cider, pie filling and apple butter later. "You're going to be sick of apples by the end of the month," she assured him. "I always am, but we'll be able to sell some of it in stores during the winter and you should just wait to taste that cider once it turns!"

Maraich fell into bed that night exhausted. He heard Carly's footsteps creaking on the floorboards to her room, then the silence of the house. He was used to hearing at least a little noise from the London street, but all there was here was a little wind, some leaves rustling. At home there would usually

be the sound of Bancoran's breathing in the darkness, at least.

Bancoran. Maraich waited a few more minutes, then slung a robe over his pajamas and headed downstairs, Ninja following at his ankles. He went into the living room and turned on the lights, then the television. If he could hold out until 1:30, he could call Bancoran as he was waking up.

He napped during a rerun of *Saturday Night Live* and opened his eyes again just after one. He fidgeted his way through a magazine until 1:25, then couldn't wait any longer. He entered the kitchen and picked up the phone. He dialed their home number and heard the phone ring a good number of times before Ban answered.

"Hello?"

"Ban?"

"Maraich! Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm safe."

"Where are you being held captive?"

"I'm not. I'm in a place in the country and I'm working."

"Are you in England?"

"No, I'm not in the U.K. I like it here, though, and I like working."

"I want you on the next plane home!" Bancoran's shout brought a burst of static on the line. Their living room phone did that. The one in the bedroom had perfect reception. That meant that Bancoran had migrated from the bedroom to the living room to get the call. In other words, it was likely that there was someone in the bedroom whom Bancoran didn't want to disturb.

"I'll come home when I'm ready."

"Who are you living with?"

"A friend."

"Oh? Who?"

"Don't worry, Ban, we're not sleeping together. Which, I think, is more than I can say for you."

"Are you accusing me of unfaithfulness?"

"Are you surprised?"

Just then, the bedroom extension was picked up. "Ban, quit arguing with your lover and come back to bed. It's so boring when you're away."

"That's Little Marky!" Maraich shouted. "Get out of my bed, you bitch!"

"Now who's calling who a bitch? You're the one who ran out on him."

"Both of you shut up," Bancoran ordered. His extension shut off, then Maraich heard footsteps, Marky's protest, and the other phone clicking off. Then there was only the hiss of the transatlantic connection. He put the phone into its cradle and returned to bed. Ninja climbed up onto his shoulder as Maraich curled up under the covers to cry.



"Maraich? Maraich, get up, we've got work to do."

He rolled over and glanced to the door. "Can I stay in bed a little longer?"

"Don't you feel well?"

"Not really."

"May I come in?"

"Sure."

Carly entered, fully dressed. She sat on the bed and touched his forehead. "You don't have a fever. What's wrong?"

"Well, I...I called Ban last night. I had to let him know I was alive."

"And?"

"And I caught him with another boy in his bed. I wonder how long he waited before replacing me."

"I don't think he's replaced you, not emotionally. Not unless he never cared for you at all, which I don't think is the case. That's going by what you've told me."

"I thought you said our relationship was unhealthy."

"Oh, it looks that way to me, but that doesn't mean you don't love each other. It just needs work." She stroked Maraich's hair. "Why does he cheat? You're as sweet and attractive as they come."

Maraich shrugged. "Sometimes I think I'm not enough for him. Or that he doesn't need me. The other problem is that I'm getting older and Bancoran likes them young."

Ugh, Carly thought to herself. "From what you told me, it's not surprising that he'd have a low self-esteem. I mean, being sold into prostitution by one's mother isn't like to cause feelings of security."

"I guess not. Still, I wish... I wish his low self-esteem wouldn't contribute to my low self-esteem." Maraich was glad that he had Carly, Ninja, and Yuki there when he was depressed. It gave him a cheering section. Yuki stepped up onto a pillow and licked his face with a rough tongue.

"We all like you," Carly assured him. "I can drive you to whatever embassy you need in Washington DC. It's only an hour and a half away. From there you can go back to England. Dulles International Airport is close to here, but I imagine you need paperwork." She snorted. "I don't even have a passport."

"I want to finish off the apple picking. I want to help make cider and things."

"You can't hide forever, Maraich."

"I've only been here a few days. I'm doing things I've never done before. I have problems with Ban, yes, and I didn't come here under the best of circumstances, but I like it here. I'm fascinated. You said I could stay if I worked and I want to because I'm enjoying myself. Please, Carly?"

Carly was finding Maraich's presence very helpful. There was, of course, the fact that he appealed to her maternal instincts, being the little-boy-lost that he was. She wasn't going to admit that, though. "All right. If that's the reason you want to stay here."

"Hurrah!" Maraich smiled under his tangle of red hair.

"But you have to get up. I'll fix breakfast while you get dressed. Ever had apple butter?"

"No."

"I'll get a jar out of last year's and we can put it on our biscuits. That way you can see what we're going to spend lots of hours making."



On Saturday, Carly knocked on Maraich's door earlier than usual. They tended to the cats, then loaded up her pickup truck with bushels of apples. They stopped at McDonald's for breakfast on the way into Winchester. Once there, they set up in a farmer's market and waited for tourists.

Carly didn't like tourists, but they paid her bills. Upper middle class

families piled out of their station wagons and began circuiting around the tables, the women deciding what they wanted and digging money out of their purses for it, arguing with their husbands all the time. They were ignoring Carly and Maraich, so Carly ignored them in turn and petted their dogs, when dogs were brought along.

"Thank you, goils, and have a noice day," one woman in pink slacks and a red windbreaker squealed at them as she turned away from buying half a bushel.

"Thanks, goils, and have a noice day," a male voice mimicked at Carly. She looked up from her money-box to see a classic example of genus *redneckus americanus* heading towards her, replete in thermal underwear shirt--plaid flannel--jeans, work boots and a Red Man cap. He had some buddies with him. "Hah, Carly, looks lahk yew got one of mah pals here a date."

"Go die in a hole, Caleb," she told him. Maraich looked over at her nervously. "Guy from my high school," she explained quickly. "Always pestering me for dates."

"Ah'll take the redhayd!" volunteered another one. "Lemme take a closer look!" He ambled closer and suddenly observed Maraich's slim hips and flat chest.

"Caleb, Ah don't think this here lydee's a lydee. Ah think it's one of them transvalstites."

"Lemme see." Caleb came over and grabbed Maraich's arm to inspect him.

"Caleb! You leave my friend alone!" Carly stood up to shove him away, but he didn't let go.

"Carly, what the hell is this? He got a body like a boy and a face and hair like a girl. You hanging out with homos these days? You'll catch AIDS or some such shit."

"Yes, well, you don't have to worry about catching it from me." She tried to disengage Caleb's fingers from Maraich's arm.

"Oh no? Well, maybe now you got a taste for the forbidden fruit and need the temptation removed."

Caleb tossed Maraich back towards his buddies. Carly frantically scanned the area for the police, but there weren't any and no one seemed to notice that there was any trouble in her little corner; southern boys play rough at times.

"Leave him alone, Caleb," Carly warned again. She remembered Maraich's claims to assassin training but was still hesitant to believe them.

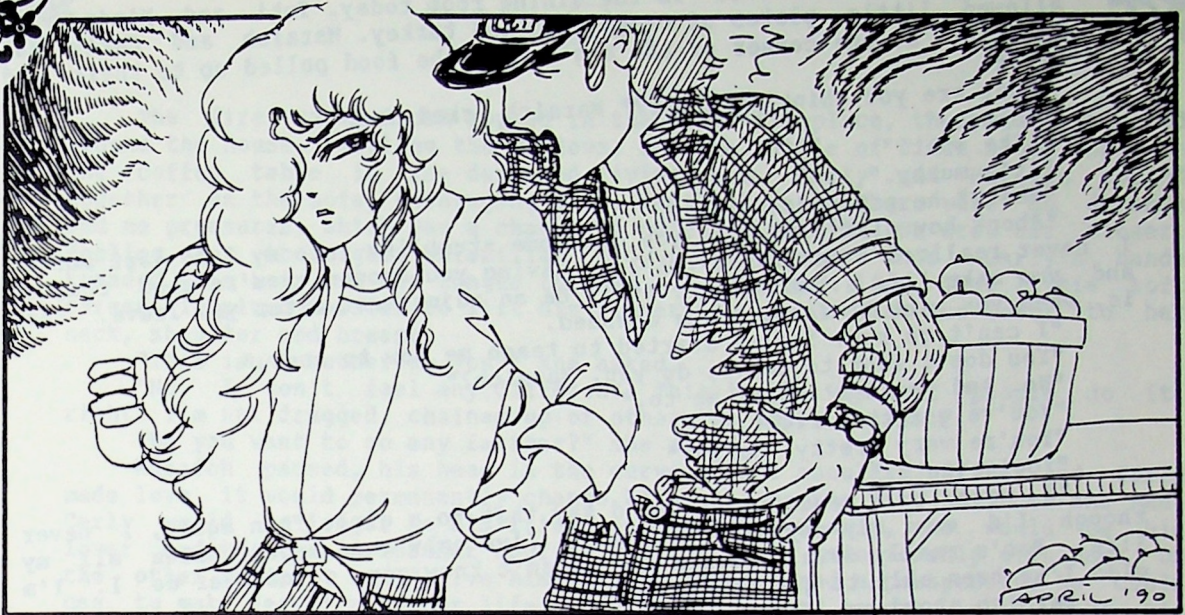
Caleb grabbed Maraich with an arm across the chest and began to muss his hair. Maraich appeared to handle this with as much dignity as a cat with whom a child is tussling. When one of the others came over to join in, his patience vanished.

Caleb let out a pained whoosh of air after Maraich jabbed an elbow into his diaphragm. Once the other man was completely off guard, Maraich threw him easily over his shoulder, then straightened into a front snap kick into the face of one of the other rednecks. The second man then received two hard punches in the stomach before Maraich turned to smack Caleb sprawling again.

The other pair didn't seem too willing to join in the fight. Maraich made a couple of menacing moves at them and they backed off. He grabbed Caleb by the ear and demanded, "You keep away from Carly, got that? She doesn't like you and I don't either. I may look cute, but I'm made of tougher stuff than you and I was being gentle just then. Go away! Leave us alone!" He kicked the second man in the rear and returned to Carly's side.

"Nice work," she commented.

"I could've killed them," he informed her casually. "Four stupid men against me. But that would've called too much attention to me and I don't want



to get you in trouble." He kissed Carly's hand, making sure the departing Caleb saw.

"You didn't do so well against the CIA," she observed.

"Six agents against me. My talents go only so far. Those kids weren't a problem."

They were left alone and as the day progressed they sold enough fruit to satisfy Carly. They spent Sunday quietly, riding horseback after sleeping late, then taking care of the cats before a leisurely brunch. After sundown, Carly worked on quarterly tax forms while Maraich played the piano.

A month passed and they were celebrating Thanksgiving. Carly's brother stayed further south in Virginia to have the holiday with his girlfriend and her family, so it was just her, Maraich, and the cats. In the morning, as Maraich came in from his chores, Carly stepped from the kitchen and said, "Come in here. I want to show you some things."

After he'd stripped off his coat, he joined her in the kitchen. In the refrigerator was the turkey, which she removed and placed on the counter.

"Very easy and still fancy," she said. "This is a ten pound bird. It's unstuffed and unbasted. Here's what you do with it. After taking it from the package you need to take the guts out, which are usually in a little paper bag inside, and wash the bird. The giblets get saved for gravy. I have the stuffing already made, so we won't go into how to make that. Now, I start by packing the stuffing lightly into the bird..."

Maraich watched the process and Carly eventually showed him how to make some of the simple side dishes, then let him do it. Maraich was fascinated. He only knew about cooking from books which didn't go into sufficient detail for him, so having an experienced cook telling him how to go about it was a treat. After he had mashed potatoes and prepared a broccoli casserole, he brought out one of Carly's cookbooks and asked questions about the terms used and gave her some of the problems he'd encountered while preparing meals in London for Ban.

Dinner was served in the dining room today. Yuki and Ninja were allowed little plates of chopped cooked turkey. Maraich and Carly sat together at one corner of the big table, the food pulled up to their end of it.

"What are you thinking about?" Maraich asked her.

"Things."

"Like what?"

"It's mushy."

"What?" he pressed, smiling.

"About how glad I am that you did come stumbling into my land last month. I never realized I was lonely. I like having you around, you're good company and you make life a lot easier. It'll be an adjustment after you leave. That is, when you want to leave," she amended.

"I can't go now. You've started to teach me how to cook."

"You don't want to leave, do you, Maraich?"

"No. And you don't want me to."

"You've got that right."

"You're very pretty, Carly."

"You're nuts."

"I mean it. I never thought I'd say that to a girl. Then again, I never though I'd ever say anything to a girl. I've only been around males all my life. Ban's really down on women. He doesn't know any, so neither do I. I'm glad I've been able to get to know one."

Maraich stood up, leaned over the corner of the table, and kissed her. It was much the same as kissing another bishonen, except that Carly wasn't wearing any lipstick.



She closed her eyes for as long as it lasted and even raised a hand to touch his cheek. Maraich sat back down, pleased. That had been one of the easiest, most stressless kisses of his life. She was smiling. It was only after he had cleared the dishes that he realized the implications. He'd never felt any desire even to look at pictures of women. In the British Museum he had spent long periods of time gazing at statues of Greek gods, but never goddesses. He remembered looking at Carly when she was working in a T-shirt and wondering if he was one-hundred-percent bishonen. This was as frightening to him as it would be to any person questioning his or her accepted sexual inclinations; his fear stemmed primarily from the prospect of facing the unknown and the way the unknown could change his world in a profound way.

Carly stuck the pumpkin pie into the oven and began washing dishes. Maraich dried them as they were handed to him. It had always been important to him that he know he was loved. Maraich was certain most of the time that Ban loved him. He was pretty sure that if Carly loved him she wouldn't give him any cause to feel insecure. He'd become very fond of her over the past weeks. She had responded happily to his kiss. His longing for a secure family life became very acute and he knew fulfilling it was possibly within reach.

He put down one of the plates, dried his hands, and pressed himself against Carly's back, holding her around the waist. They were almost the same height, and his lips touched the back of her neck. Her wet, warm hands covered his and she turned her head to kiss him. They stood with their arms around each other and Carly said softly, "Guess what? I have a bottle of hard cider from last year. What say after dessert I make a fire and we drink it?"

"Sounds romantic."

"I thought so." She gave him a quick peck. "Let's finish off these dishes so they're not waiting for us later."



The fire crackled and popped in the stone fireplace, the wind whooshed around the house, rattling the windows, and the bottle of cider stood empty on the coffee table in the darkened living room. Carly and Maraich curled together on the sofa, exchanging slow, gentle kisses. There were no demands and no pressures, which was a change of pace for Maraich. He drew her closer, feeling her thoroughly-unfamiliar body press against his. Carly's hands kneaded his hair and her tongue touched his half-open lips. That little soft caress inspired Maraich to lift his fingers to her jawline and lower to her neck, shoulder and breast.

"This isn't bothering you?" she asked.

"No. I don't feel any different. This is the way most people do it, right? I'm not drugged, chained up or otherwise under duress."

"Do you want to go any farther?" she asked.

Maraich paused, his head in the curve of her shoulder. If he and Carly made love, it would permanently change his relationship with both her and Ban. Carly would no longer be his friend and benefactor only, she would be his lover and that would further confuse his on-hiatus relationship with Ban. On the other hand, it would give him so many answers and a perspective he could use to make decisions about life. They would be hard to make, even with his new knowledge, but they would be his choices, made freely.

"Yes. I do want to go farther."


Usually it was Ban who would initiate sex. He would maneuver Maraich onto the bed and dominate the encounter. It was always pleasurable for Maraich, but he didn't feel that either of them should be in control. Still, he wanted to avoid being passive. He lifted Carly into his arms and carried her, not without some difficulty, to the thick wool rug in front of the fireplace. He reached down and unbuttoned her shirt and Carly helped by reaching back to unhook her bra. Maraich folded them neatly and laid them on the piano bench. He turned to admire the smooth lines of her upper body, then lay down on the carpet to kiss her. One of his hands cupped a breast and found it soft, smooth and warm. Carly began to work on the buttons of his shirt and soon they were both half-naked, sharing the heat of their bodies. Maraich pulled away from her lips to stroke her neck and chest with his own before stopping to circle one of her nipples with the tip of his tongue. Ban always liked that and it seemed that she did too. Carly's fingers massaged the back of his neck under the long hair, raising his face to hers again so that she could unbutton his jeans.

Maraich knelt to slide them down from his hips and drop them beside the rug. Carly unexpectedly rolled over, lowered her head to the level of Maraich's upper thighs and began to pleasure him in a mode with which he was very familiar. It also answered another one of his questions: this was not her first time with a man. He sat back and closed his eyes, enjoying the attention, then forced himself to put his hands on her shoulders and push her onto her back. He undid her belt and gently helped her with her pants.

Maraich studied Carly's body. "Where do I start?"

"Here." She took his fingers and guided them down between her thighs. To her relief, Maraich only looked a little puzzled and asked, "Ought it to be that damp?"

"You and Ban need lubrication, don't you? A woman's body manufactures it



naturally."

"Oh. How--economical." He leaned over to have a better look and touched her a few different ways, waiting for her approval. Carly was smiling, so he didn't worry. Maraich bent down further to stroke her with his tongue. That elicited a sudden, sharp moan of pleasure from her, but unfortunately he quickly came to the decision that the flavor of a woman's body was an acquired taste and said so. There were a variety of sensations to stay in their memories; the roughness of the rug, the silky cover of Maraich's hair over the two of them, the heat of the fire on their skin.

Maraich stroked the curve of Carly's hip, enjoying the new experience that was so different from anything in his past. He turned her onto her back and lay down on top. Carly opened her legs and helped him in, then raised her knees so she could embrace him with both arms and legs. Maraich bit his lip. He'd never felt anything like this during sex before, and he liked it. He kissed Carly, then followed his body's cues, pressing more deeply into her. She clung to him, answering his movements with her own, occasionally emitting little cries of pleasure. Maraich held on with his arms around her back, writhing with her on the floor until lovemaking rose to its natural climax, after which they nestled against each other, exhausted.

Carly and Maraich slept in front of the fireplace, covered with the patchwork quilt from the sofa, the housecats at their feet. Before dawn, Carly rose to stir the fire and add a few more logs. She didn't stay there long; it was cold and she dove back under the covers to warm herself against Maraich.

He awakened with Carly still in his arms. He'd awakened briefly while she was tending the fire and admired, even in his drowsy state, the rounded shapes of her back and bottom and the profile of her nude body. Strange and new as heterosexual sex was, he liked it. Loving Bancoran had its advantages too, but nestling here with a warm, soft woman was sheer luxury.

"I think a hot shower is in order," she told him when she awakened. "Stress on the word hot."



Life after the consummation was domestic. They were officially a couple, at least in their own eyes. They held hands while out riding, slept and bathed together. After a few weeks, they went out looking for a Christmas tree.

Patchy was harnessed to a cart and Carly led him out to the pine woods on her land. Maraich carried a saw. "There ought to be a few eight-footers," she told him. "I saw a couple this summer."

"Where's the tree going in the house?"

"Living room. It's got the highest ceiling." They walked through the woods, unimpaired by snow. It was bitterly cold, but the sky above was a clear blue and the wind was the kind that tore right through a person.

"How's this one?" Maraich asked, pointing to one.

"Height's right, but I'd like a tree that's fuller. I have a lot of ornaments."

"What about this one?"

"It has a hole right here in the branches."

"We can turn it to the wall."

"It'd make it too hard to string the lights across it."

Maraich snorted.

"How's this one, Maraich?"

"Too fat."

"Fat? It's tall and full. What more could we want?"

"It'll take up half the living room and poke right into the piano."

"You could be right." They continued on a bit. "What about that one?"

Eventually they settled on a tree. To Carly it was just slightly too scrawny and Maraich insisted that it curved to the top, but it was the least offensive one and he lay down on his side to cut it. He and Carly loaded it onto the cart and Patchy pulled it home.

After hot coffee, they began to decorate it. Carly tested the lights and they started to put the ornaments on the tree. All of them had memories of some sort or other to Carly and she wistfully explained them all to Maraich.

"I wish I had a family," he told her. "Either relatives or a family of my own. I want a baby."

"Well, you're on the right track, at least," she quipped, kissing him. Maraich opted not to tell her the story of how, before his knowledge of biology had become firm, he had been positive that he was pregnant with Bancoran's child and convinced that a blow to the abdomen had made him miscarry. The fear of that had been less dreadful than discovering that he and Ban could never have a family.

All this reminded him that in the past few years, he and Bancoran had collected a few ornaments of their own. Not many, but it was a start. All of a sudden, he realized that this would be the first year after four that he wouldn't be with Bancoran on his birthday/Christmas. Maraich felt his mood sink. That meant Ban would probably spend a meaningless holiday in the arms of some other bishonen, probably the saccharine, whiny Little Marky.

That night, Maraich lay thinking as Carly slept beside him. He had to confront Ban with the new things he had learned and the person he'd become. He owed it to Bancoran. The last four years had been very good for the most part. True, Bancoran could often lose control of his urges, but Maraich was in retrospect aware that the agent loved him. He did not deserve to be abandoned, not knowing why his life companion refused to come home. It would be especially cruel to do it at this time of the year. Maraich's new friend cared for him, but she wasn't the one who had seen him through battle injuries, assaults and nightmares.

Carly somehow sensed that he was awake and troubled. She rolled over and snuggled her nude body against his. She nuzzled her face into his hair and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I have to go back to England."

"What for?"

"If I'm going to break up to Bancoran, I must do it in person. Right now, all he knows is that I'm alive. His birthday is coming up and I'm here with no explanation why."

"How long will you be gone?"


"I don't know. You've been very good for me, Carly. I know that I don't have to be dependent on another man, that I can work and not be a pampered doll-cum-killer. But I've been with Ban a long time. If he wants me back, I want to stay with him."

Carly pulled away, although her range of movement was limited by the frigid air outside the covers. "Damn you! I should've guessed this would happen." She turned away from him.

Maraich touched her shoulder. "Carly..."

"Shut up."

This sudden sharpness on her part was an aspect he hadn't expected and he said so.



Carly rolled onto her back and didn't look at him. "I have a habit of letting this happen to me. It used to happen pretty frequently in school, although I didn't ever sleep with a boyfriend until college. I always picked up the strays, the ones with problems with drinking or drugs, family trouble, you name it. I've always been used as a crutch and abandoned. I saw the pattern starting all over again, but you were so different and special that I hoped that once, just once, I wasn't going to be left again." She sighed. "It's always worse when my body's involved too. Don't worry, I didn't sleep with you because you were a charity case. It's a gorgeous little body. I just hoped that this would be the time that would last."

"I'd wager that Ban did too."

She turned back towards Maraich. "Hold me, would you?"

Maraich drew her back into his arms, cradling her protectively against his chest.

"Maraich, if you really think that you have to go back to Bancoran, so be it. Just promise me I won't be forgotten."

"Not very likely."

"Don't take that lightly. These have been happy months for me. I don't want to be relegated to whatever corner of your mind you save for ex-lovers."

"Never, Carly." He kissed her forehead and felt her tears burn his shoulder.

The next morning, he phoned CIA headquarters and asked for Arthur Hewitt. After being on hold for a few minutes, the field agent answered the call.

"Maraich! Thank Bob you're safe. Bancoran's been going nuts. He calls about once a week for updates. Where are you, kiddo?"

"Out near Winchester, Virginia."

"How'd you get there?"

"Long story. I've lost my passport, or rather, it was left in London. I want to go home to Ban for Christmas."

"I can stand behind that. I'll have it couriered from England. I'll call you when that comes in and you can meet me at the British Embassy, since M.I.6 will probably pick up your ticket."



Carly was subdued as she drove him into Washington a day later. She said little as Maraich met with Hewitt at the embassy and they chatted about old times.

"Now, I suppose you'll want the first flight to England?" asked the consul when Maraich's papers were in order.


Maraich winced. "Um-no. I have some unfinished business here. If you could fly me out tomorrow night?"

Hewitt raised an eyebrow, but all he said was, "Well, if you do that, you and Miss Jefferson here could have dinner at my place. I even have two spare rooms."

Maraich glanced back at his lover. "We have a room in Reston, near the airport."

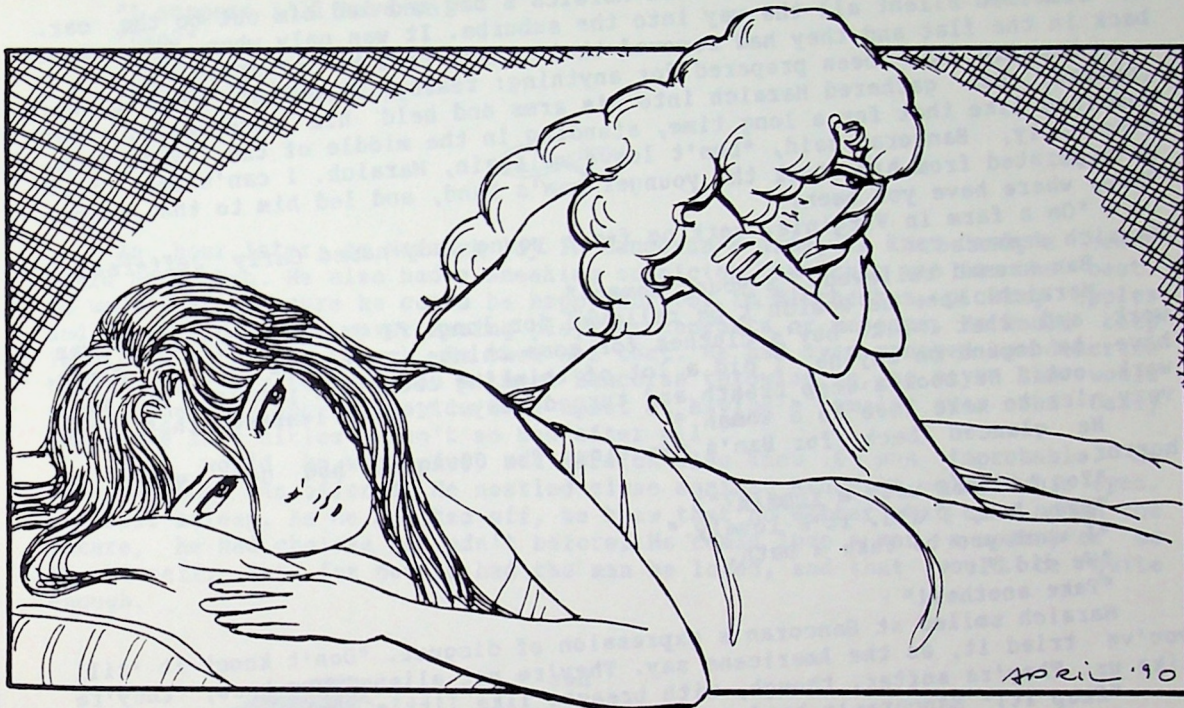
"Well-1, okay."

From the embassy, the couple hastened to a pay phone to reserve a room. This had been an afterthought on Maraich's part; where to spend the night had not arisen in their plans, but they did not want to be sequestered in separate rooms on their last night together. From there they meandered through the



National Gallery of Art, not really looking at anything but each other. When it closed, they made their agonized way through the rush hour traffic on the George Washington Parkway past the silvery towers of Rosslyn, the Gothic spires of Georgetown University, through the forest and McLean, Virginia. They crawled toward the Dulles access road, stopped to have dinner at the American Cafe, then continued on to the airport hotel.

The hotel room was nice. The bathroom was spacious, the bed was large and had a good mattress. They cleaned up, stripped, and climbed under the covers, where they clung to each other.



Maraich's flight wasn't until five, so they spent the day talking, making love and ordering from room service. Before three, they rose reluctantly and took a shower, spending a long time under the hot spray, kissing and stroking each other for what they knew could be the last time. Just before four, they went into the terminal for Maraich to show his passport and airline ticket. His single bag was suitable for an overhead compartment.

They stood at Security for a few minutes, Maraich clutching his bag, Carly wringing her hands, a gesture he had never seen her use before. "I guess this is good-bye," he said.

"There's still time to reconsider," she reminded him.

"There'll be more time when I'm in London, after I've talked to Ban," he insisted. "Carly, there's no way I can thank you enough. I know you've changed my life. How I don't know yet."

"I want you to come back," she stated, her voice beginning to catch.

Maraich set her bag down and took her in his arms. She sobbed on his shoulder for a while, then made herself stop. She gave him a last salty kiss. "Okay, I'm better now. You'd better go."

"I'll miss you."

"Yeah. The bed's going to be awfully cold without you."

Maraich couldn't say the same thing, so he hugged her one last time and went through the arch.

His plane arrived in London at 6 a.m. local time. He took his carry-on bag, went through Customs and Immigration, then into the crowds of the main terminal. Bancoran was waiting for him, dressed in a dark suit, frowning and smoking a cigarette.

"Hello, Ban."

Bancoran said nothing. He took Maraich's bag and led him out to the car. He remained silent all the way into the suburbs. It was only when they were back in the flat and they had removed their coats that he did anything.

Maraich had been prepared for anything: tears, shouting, even blows. Instead, Ban gathered Maraich into his arms and held him wordlessly. They remained like that for a long time, standing in the middle of the living room. Eventually, Bancoran said, "Don't leave me again, Maraich. I can't bear it." He separated from him, took the younger man's hand, and led him to the couch. "Now, where have you been?"

"On a farm in Virginia, working for a young lady named Carly Jefferson," Maraich answered.

Ban seemed relieved. "A young woman."

Maraich knew he wouldn't be relieved for long. "I discovered that I can work and that I like boy's clothes for some things. I learned that I don't have to depend on anyone. I did a lot of thinking about the problems we must work out." He took a deep breath and turned away. "I also learned that it's very nice to make love to a woman."

He glanced back for Ban's reaction. The OO agent had gone white in horror.

"You had sex with a female?"

"Yes, Ban, I did. It's lovely."

"I want you to take a bath."

"We did."

"Take another!"

Maraich smiled at Bancoran's expression of disgust. "Don't knock it 'till you've tried it, as the Americans say. They're not aliens, you know, they're like us. They're softer, though, with breasts like little pillows--"

"Stop it!" Bancoran's hands went over his ears.

"You slept with Little Marky. Which is worse?"

"True," Bancoran had to admit. "True. But when you were gone, I also did a lot of thinking. Monogamy just might suit me." His famous blue eyes met Maraich's. "I bedded quite a few boys while you were gone, Maraich. None of them pleased me very much. A few years ago, those sleek little bodies would have driven me mad with desire. Now, I only want you."

"Ban." Maraich wriggled closer to him. "I feared I might be too old for your tastes. I thought that was one of the reasons you were cheating on me."

"No. I'm going to be thirty-one soon, Maraich. It's not old, but as soon as I passed age twenty-nine, I realized that someday I wasn't going to be young and attractive anymore."

"That's a long way off, Ban. You're going to stay handsome for many years to come."

"Not the point. I realized that someday I would be an old remnant of a bishonen, chasing after fifteen-year-olds. I couldn't think of anything more repulsive. Not even sleeping with a woman," he added with a hint of a smile. "So I want you to stay with me, Maraich. Grow old with me."

Maraich blinked. "Ban, you--"

"I love you, Maraich. I want you to stay with me, with no one else between us."

Maraich felt tears rising in his eyes. He had dreamed of this moment, taking pleasure in Bancoran's minutes of fierce jealousy, mistaking them for love. This was real. This was not to be taken lightly.

"Yes, Ban, yes!" He threw himself into Bancoran's arms and they kissed. Bancoran slipped an arm under Maraich's knees and lifted him. Two steps towards the bedroom door, he exclaimed, "Good lord, you've put on weight!"

"I've become more solid. Can you accept that?"

"I suppose I'll have to."

"Ban?"

"Hm?"

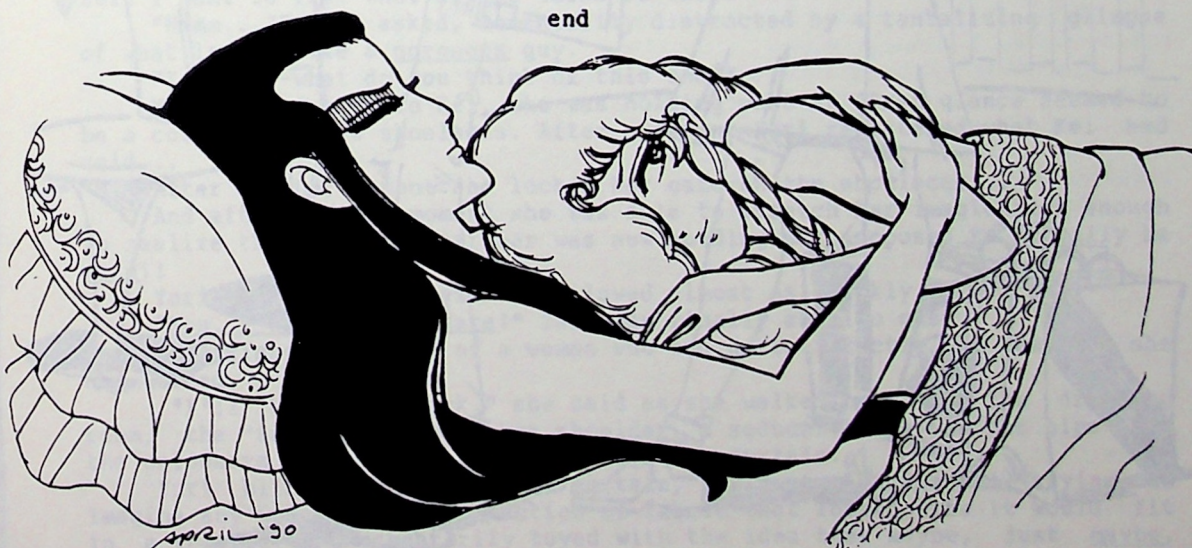
"I want to be on top!"



An hour later, as Maraich lay in Bancoran's arms, he knew Carly's heart would be broken. He also had a sneaking suspicion that this was for the best. He wasn't at all sure he could be happy forever in Winchester, picking apples and tending cats and never seeing plays or concerts or museums. He would keep in touch with her, though. He owed her that. He had even managed to describe heterosexual sex to Bancoran without Bancoran throwing up, so maybe she would visit one day and Ban wouldn't be upset at having a female over and Carly would see that cities weren't so bad after all.

That would be wonderful, but Maraich also knew it was improbable. He accepted what was offered. He nestled close against Bancoran, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. As he drifted off, he knew that no matter what came up in the future, he had choices he hadn't before. He could love a man, a woman, or be by himself. But for now he had the man he loved, and that would be quite enough.

end





Kiss of a Stranger

by Michael Bellinger



"What about this one?"

As Kei stepped out of the dressing room, Yuri looked up from the magazine for what seemed the hundredth time, her blue eyes peering over the rim of her sunglasses. She coolly appraised her partner as she modeled yet another swimsuit, this one a light green maillot with a cleavage revealing mesh V-front that plunged just about as far south of her waist as modesty would allow. A turn revealed that the back was doing its best to be daring as the front. After a moment Yuri gave a precise, professional opinion:

"Yuck!" she said, sticking out her tongue.

"Jealous," Kei said, revealing her tongue in return. She strode to the full-length mirror, adjusting the suits seat as she went. "I like it. Maybe they have it in blue..."

"Green is your color," Yuri ventured.

"You said that about the red."

"That was a hour and sixteen suits ago! Right now I'd say that plaid was your color if it would get us out of here."

"Is this the same woman who just spent two hours buying five pairs of shoes?"

Yuri fidgeted in her seat, protectively pulling her shopping bags closer to her. "That was different! I needed new shoes."

Kei grinned triumphantly. "And I need a new suit. Besides, you're just sore that you didn't have an audience watching you try on shoes."

Yuri glanced at the half-dozen or so men surrounding the area, all of whom exhibited intense interest in whatever article of ladies clothing was nearby whenever the girls looked their way. As Yuri watched, one man seemed utterly fascinated by the fit of a strapless bra on a countertop mannequin.

"Anyway I'm almost finished," Kei continued. "There's just one more suit I want to try. What do you think of this?"

"Hmmm...?" Yuri asked, momentarily distracted by a tantalizing glimpse of what looked like a gorgeous guy.

"I asked--what do you think of this one?"

Yuri turned back to Kei, who was holding what at first glance seemed to be a couple of black shoelaces. After a moment Yuri registered what Kei had said...

After another moment she locked her gaze on the shoelaces...

And after another moment she was able to stretch her imagination enough to realize that what her partner was now holding was supposed to actually be worn!!


Yuri dropped her magazine, followed almost as quickly by her jaw.

"You... wouldn't... dare!" Yuri was finally able to gasp.

Kei grinned the grin of a woman who had gotten exactly the reaction she had wanted.

"I'll be right back," she said as she walked back to the dressing room, the "suit" slung over her shoulder, a seductive sway in her hips for the onlookers as she disappeared through the curtain.

Yuri blinked blankly at the curtain, trying to imagine Kei--trying to imagine any woman!--in a collection of fabric that looked like it would fit in a thimble. She momentarily toyed with the idea that maybe, just maybe,



that Kei was kidding and she wasn't about to start a minor riot (Yuri was acutely aware that the number of onlookers had magically doubled) by appearing in little more than her omnipresent hair ribbon and a smile...

But only for a moment. This, after all, was Kei. With a sigh she reached for her dropped magazine.

"Let me get this for you."

Yuri first focused on the hand that lightly stayed her reach as its companion scooped up the magazine. Even the light touch had a feeling of strength, the fingers supple and full of grace. Her eyes naturally followed the line of his arm to where it met his bended knee. Her gaze continued along the curve of his calf, encased in what appeared to be wonderfully tight slacks to a slim waist, muscular chest and broad shoulders covered by a slick, Polo-like shirt.

Everything--the store, Kei, the ogles--disappeared when she saw his face.

He was smiling, his lightly dimpled face practically beaming. His eyes were sapphire-blue and seemed to twinkle from within. Light, sandy blond hair fell in a devil-may-care sweep across his right eye. As he stood, he casually tossed his head, the ends lightly brushing his shoulders.

"Here you go," The Vision said as he handed her the magazine. "There should always be a gentleman around to help a lady."

Yuri's eyes never left his as she took the magazine. She knew she should say something, say anything!, but his eyes held her in a unbreakable trance. She was aware that her mouth was opening and closing, but no sound was coming out.

"Where are my manners?" the man continued. "My name is Johann. And you are...?"

Yuri finally got her mouth to work, after a fashion. "Yu... Yuri?" she squeaked.

Johann smile got broader, a feat which up until that moment Yuri would have thought impossible.

"Yuri. A lovely name for an even lovelier lady." He made an exaggerated, gentlemanly sweep of his hand. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Nodding his head toward the curtain, he continued. "Maybe I will see you and your friend again sometime."

"Huh? Oh... uh, Kei!" Yuri's recovery was slow in coming, but she found she could still handle names.

"Is that her name?" Johann asked charmingly. He glanced around, then whispered conspiratorially in Yuri's ear, "Personally, I don't think she'll look half as good in that suit as you would."

Yuri blushed and giggled. "Me? In that? Oh, I couldn't... Well, I could... but I wouldn't, not really..."

"You are far too modest," Johann said. He leaned forward, his hand cupping her chin, tilting her head upward.


He's not, Yuri thought. He couldn't. He isn't really about to...

Johann kissed her.

No, Yuri thought. Johann kissed her. It was like lightning, coursing from her lips to her toes, then back up to her heart. It was a thrill she had never felt before, the thrill that came from the mysterious, the unknown...

The kiss of a stranger.





Yuri was still coming up for air some moments after Johann had pulled away. She was dimly aware that she had dropped her magazine again... and that Johann was saying something to her. Then he was past her, walking down the aisle.

Yuri's mind raced. She kept wanting to return to the--what? five, ten minutes of bliss that had been that kiss! But what had he just said to her before he left? After a few seconds she had it: "I'll call you tonight."

Yuri grinned and sighed. Wait till Kei gets a load of this dreamboat. More than her swimsuit is going to be green when Johann calls...

At that second a single, crystal-clear fact sprang into her head, a fact so horrible in nature that it galvanized her almost as much as Johann's kiss:

He didn't have her number!!

"Eeekkkk!" Yuri yelped, springing to her feet. One of the male onlookers, panicking at the sudden scream, dove over a counter, taking a young saleswoman down with him. The two disappeared behind the counter with a scream and a cloud of panties. Yuri spun quickly, her eyes darting, trying to find a certain blond head.

There was a sudden rattle of curtain rings behind her, then the triumphant "TA-DAH!" of Kei's voice.

If Yuri had been paying a bit more attention, she would have been witness to medical history as a dozen men's hearts simultaneously skipped a beat at the sight of Kei and what she was almost wearing. Then again, maybe not, for at that exact instant Yuri caught a glimpse of Johann as he walked out of the store into the mall beyond.

"KEEIII! We've got to go! Now!!" Yuri cried, and began scooping up hers and Kei's bags. "He is sooo gorgeous and he doesn't have our number!"

Kei was momentarily taken aback, especially by the fact that Yuri hadn't even turned around to see her yet. "Who... what... where... are you talking about...? OOOFF!" The last was caused by Yuri suddenly shoving a group of bags into her arms, then yanking her down the aisle. "Wait a minute! My clothes are still..."

"He'll get away!" Yuri wailed. "Come on, come on, come on!"

Kei was so surprised by Yuri's urgency that she had little choice but to come along, juggling the packages with one arm as Yuri pulled her with the other. The cashier at the front of the store watched the spectacle approaching her with amazement. She opened her mouth to speak, but by then Kei had fished her charge card out of her bag and she snapped it through the air at her.


"Ring it all up," she cried. "I'll be back for my clothes and stuff after I kill my girlfriend here!"

The credit card thudded into the wall next to the cashier, the corner embedding itself a good half-inch. There was a sudden outbreak of applause and whistles from the male onlookers and Kei was able to hesitate long enough to flash a smile and a victory sign before Yuri yanked her away.



Outside the store, Yuri paused as her eyes scanned the afternoon crowd. There was just enough time for Kei to re-arrange the packages in her arms before Yuri suddenly spotted Johann as he stepped into an elevator.

"Now just what is all this lunacy about..." Kei was able to start



before Yuri suddenly took off again with her in tow.

"There's this really gorgeous guy, and he said that he'll call but he doesn't have our number and now he's getting away..." Yuri rushed out as they scrambled through the crowds. "JOHANN!! JO... Oh no!" As she watched, the elevator doors closed. Yuri skidded, then pivoted, causing Kei to perform another major juggling act, then she was off like a shot towards the escalators.

"Yuri!" Kei cried. "This guy had better be worth it, or so help me..." Kei had suddenly discovered another problem in that the suit she was wearing had obviously been designed with maximum exposure/minimum activity in mind. She was sure that the bikini's designer had not envisioned anyone doing the hundred yard dash while wearing it, and as a result Kei found herself constantly have to adjust it while she ran; in particular the top, which had picked up the annoying (and revealing) tendency to jiggle while her breasts jiggled. She was getting quite a lot of looks from the men they passed, but for not quite the reasons she had originally had in mind.

The two were halfway down the last flight to the ground floor when Yuri saw the elevator, Johann, and the closing elevator doors all at the same time. She step-sided an elderly man, slipped between two lovers and hurdled a baby carriage as she took the last ten steps to the landing full tilt, screaming "JOHANN!" at the top of her lungs. She saw Johann look up, saw the smile of recognition on his face, saw him start forward...

And then the doors closed.

Yuri slammed into the closed doors, and was instantly joined by Kei who had unsuccessfully tried to stop herself by wrapping her arms around the nearest burly looking male. Thus her, Yuri, and a mall security guard ended up in a tangle at the foot of the elevator door, surrounded by a pile of shopping bags.

Yuri recovered first, to discover herself flat on her back, her face buried between Kei's breasts. She yelped and sat up, flipping over Kei, who landed on the guard's chest, who gave a muffled "WOOF!", which led to Yuri yelping again when she discovered that the guard's head was halfway up her skirt. She rapidly scooted backwards along the floor, then just as quickly composed herself.

"Excuse me," she said sweetly, batting her eyes. "Where does this elevator go?"



Forty-five seconds, another rushed explanation by Yuri, and an exchanged phone number later (Kei having found that the security guard was as good looking as he was burly, if still slightly stunned) the Dirty Pair burst through the door leading into the mall's garage. Yuri instantly jumped onto the hood of a car, frantically whipping her head from side to side.

"Where?" she began to chant, half to herself. "Where, where, where?"


"Give it up," Kei said. "He could be halfway home by now."

"Where, where, where?"

"And you probably scared him off. You're just not the aggressive type."

"Where, where... There! JOHANN!!"

"Where?" Kei asked, startled, but by then Yuri was off, leaping from car to car, setting off alarms every third or fourth car. Kei stared a moment at the spectacle before her, then muttered something about having a



boy-crazy, love-struck, starry-eyed female as a partner as she began to follow as best she could, weaving through the cars.

Then she looked ahead toward where Yuri was running and promptly walked into the end of a car when she saw Johann for herself, spilling her packages across the car's hood.

The object of Yuri's affections had paused in the act of entering a luxurious sports sedan, obviously startled at the sight of the leaping female coming toward him. Kei instantly forgave her partner for all transgressions as she took in all of Johann's charms. He was every bit as gorgeous as Yuri had said he was, and he was definitely worth chasing halfway around the mall after. She began to feverishly hope that he had a twin brother as she rubbed her sore (and very bare) hip and began to quickly scoop up her packages.

In the reflection of the car's window, she saw a van's headlights flash on.

In her present condition, standing 99 and 44/100% nude in a mall garage, scooping up shoeboxes while her girlfriend ran across cars toward her mystery man, trouble was arguably the farthest thing from her mind. Thus her off-duty WWA mind noticed the van, then instantly forgot it. Then two things changed her mind.

On the other end of the garage, another van's lights came on.

And then Johann looked back and forth at both vans with a look she couldn't decipher.

Before she even heard the vans' engines race and the squeal of the tires, Kei's mind had clicked over to her full WWA mode, and she was screaming Yuri's name as she dived for her bag.

Yuri was somehow able to hear Kei's call over the din of the car alarms. The urgency in her call caused her to stop and pivot, in time to see Kei's tush disappear behind a car. Then she took in the sight of the two vans bearing down from opposite ramps, both of them heading right toward... Johann!


"Duck! Get down!" Yuri cried at Johann. She saw that she was still at least two aisles and twenty cars away from him as she flipped up her skirt to reach her thigh holster. Her blaster was in her hand as the vans screeched to a halt at both ends of the aisle and the side doors opened, disgorging a pile of armed men.

"On the right!" Kei yelled as she popped back up, the cannon she misnamed a handgun in her hand. She pivoted to the right-hand van and tagged the first man out of the door. Yuri followed suit on the left-hand van, and then all Hell broke loose.

The attackers, while definitely well-armed, had obviously not expected there to be any true resistance to their attack, so the rather sudden and dramatic loss of two of their comrades had a telling effect on their morale. While some instantly dived for cover, a number of them simply opened up in panic, spraying the garage with automatic fire, only some of which went in the Dirty Pair's direction. It was enough for the two of them to duck in return. Kei dived over the trunk of a sedan and instantly regretted it as her bare flesh hit the tarmac. She recanted her regrets a second later as the sedan was chewed up by weapons fire. She quickly scuttled down an aisle toward Yuri, then popped up and fired.

"Yuri," she called over the din, "where's your boyfriend?"

Yuri's head peered around from behind a pillar. "Johann!" she shouted. "Johann, are you okay?" Her only answer was a burst of fire that chewed up the pillar. Yuri ducked back down and began moving toward where she had last



seen Johann.

Kei moved and fired, moved and fired, until she had flanked the right-hand van. The last few steps took her to a pillar where she paused, changed her gun's powerpack, took a deep breath and turned, gun out, yelling: "WWWA. Freeze!"

There were four men hiding behind the van, and to Kei's surprise they all froze, eyes open wide, mouths agape. Kei was almost equally stunned, since to her knowledge no one ever froze when they were told to. Most bad guys seemed to treat the term as like the end of Ready, Set, Go! After a second, Kei followed their glance downward to discover that her top had shifted, exposing two of the finer points of her physique.

"Seen enough? A real gentleman wouldn't stare like that!" She shifted the gun to a one-handed grip as she adjusted the bikini. "Now all of you..."

Kei never finished, as she suddenly saw another gunman rise from behind a car. She somersaulted backwards as the bolt sizzled through the spot she had just been standing in, striking the van, which erupted into flames, engulfing the three gunman. Kei fired in mid-air. The gunman's cover joining the conflagration as the car exploded, but he was also moving by that point and the two quickly rolled behind pillars. The klaxon of the fire alarm added to the din, and the system began pumping QuenchFyre foam everywhere, whether there was a fire or not.


Kei quickly jumped to her feet, then just as quickly fell on her rear as she slipped on the foam. She had no time to react, as a shot exploded the pillar at what would have been her head level. Kei felt a twinge of envy as she recognized the gunman's weapon as the newest light assault weapon she had lusted after in the latest ArmorTech catalog (hers was still on order).

She quickly popped out and tried to return the favor, but her gun only had the power to cut a divot out of the opposite pillar. The gunman demonstrated his advantage in firepower by shooting her pillar again, cutting her cover in half. The next shot halved her cover again, forcing her flat. The thought of what the next shot would do flashed briefly across her mind as she acted, rolling onto her back, placing her feet against the pillar and pushed. She slid backwards on the foam, rapid-firing, not at the pillar, but at where the pillar met the ceiling. The gunman's shot destroyed the last of the pillar before a part of the ceiling collapsed beside him. Overreaction and the foam conspired against him, and as the gunman popped out from cover, Kei shot him center mass. As he went down, the gun triggered one last time, then the ceiling did come down as the shot cut the pillar's top off. Kei swore as the weapon disappeared under a pile of rubble.

She turned as the sound of gunfire from around the bend announced the fact that her partner was still engaged in combat. Kei took off in a combination run/slip/slide forced by the foam. Johann's car was at the apex of the curve, and Kei gave Johann another chance to gawk, an understandable reaction, Kei thought, to the sight of a bikini-clad, foam-covered, gun-toting redhead.

"Get your... butt in the car!" Kei yelled as she ran past, deciding at the last second to leave out the "gorgeous" adjective. Johann seemed to think this was an excellent idea, and scrambled into the car as Kei hit a large patch of foam, slid the last ten feet past the bend, and opened up on the bad guys facing Yuri.

Up until the moment of Kei's arrival Yuri had considered her biggest problem the fact that the gunmen were between her and the object of her affections. The gunmen opposing her, having quickly and painfully discovered that aggressive pursuit of her was a rather fatal proposition, seemed



content with just shooting up whatever car she hid behind. Her presence alone seemed enough to dissuade them from their original task, whatever that was. Yuri had to stop herself from working her way over to Johann or even yelling to find out if he was okay, since that might remind the attackers what they were here for.

"How do we get ourselves into these messes?" Yuri said aloud to herself. "I just wanted to give him my phone number..." A brave (or stupid, Yuri wasn't sure which) gunman ran out from behind the van and Yuri calmly shot him. This was a signal for everybody else to shoot at her car and she scuttled behind a pillar, away from where Johann lay, Yuri noted in frustration.

"What the...? Look out, here comes the other one!" Yuri suddenly heard, followed almost immediately by the distinctive sound of Kei's blaster from the other side of the van. Yuri quickly leaped up in time to see the gunmen fleeing in panic and she joined the fray, gun blazing as she rushed the van. She quickly cut down the two men who came toward her and leaped over the last car hood between her and the van.

"WWWA!" she screamed as she yanked open the van door, "Nobody move!" She found herself staring down the barrel of a handgun from the opposite doorway.

"What? Nobody left to play with?" Kei asked. "Boy, the things some women will go through to get a date."

"Johann," Yuri said quietly, then: "Johann!" she shouted as she spun toward the car.

Yuri ran toward the car, her mind racing with the thought of just how grateful Johann would be for her rescue of him from the forces of evil. Maybe she wouldn't even have to wait for their first date. There were quite a few good restaurants right here in the mall. She heard Kei opening the van behind her. She'd have to get rid of Kei, wouldn't do to have her around...

Behind her, she heard Kei shout a warning.

Yuri twisted to look as she ran. She saw that it wasn't Kei who had opened the van door, but a gunman who must have been hidden in the back. She saw that he was carrying a large weapon which she vaguely recognized as something Kei had been drooling over in one of her magazines.

But most of all she saw that he was swinging the gun toward Johann's car.

Both she and Kei shot him at the same time.

As he died the gunman squeezed the trigger. Yuri's heart leaped as the bolt lanced through the air--

And passed over the car.

Before she could breathe a sigh of relief there was a second shot, then a third, a fourth. The dead man's finger continued to hold down the trigger and the gun fired wildly as he fell. The recoil drove the muzzle upward and as Yuri dived for cover she saw a succession of bolts rip through the ceiling. With a tortured roar part of the ceiling collapsed, burying Johann's car in rubble and blinding the two within a cloud of dust.

Yuri madly fanned the dust, trying to clear her line of vision from where she lay. After a few moments she could see the car. Rubble covered it from end to end. A car which had been parked on the level above had just missed falling on top of the sedan. But Johann's car was still in good shape and had not been crushed by the ceiling's collapse. Yuri thought she could just see Johann's figure through the cracked tinted glass. Grinning, she got to her feet.

The car's explosion knocked her flat.



Within the last five minutes--since the entrance of the Dirty Pair--the first level of the parking garage had been the recipient of over two hundred blaster shots, seven car fires, the loss of three load-bearing support pillars and the collapse of a one-hundred-and-fifty-five-square-foot section of ceiling. The explosion was the last straw. The parking garage spiraled along the outer surface of the cylindrical mall like a python ascending a tree and now it began to collapse. As the first section collapsed, it passed the load to the second section, which collapsed, and passed it on to the third section, and so on. The wave of destruction seemed to defy gravity as it raced upward, winding its way around the building, stopping only when it reached the top. By then all ten layers of the garage lay in ruin at the base of the tower.



Yuri sat on the floor inside the mall, staring in a daze at the doorway that just moments before had led to the garage. It now led to what appeared to be a wall of solid concrete. Someone began to help her to her feet, but her eyes stayed locked onto the silent stone beyond the doorway.

"Johann," she said quietly.

"I think," Kei said as she began to dust Yuri off, "that there was a bit more to our friend than met the eye."

Yuri nodded absentmindedly as she looked at the doorway, as if she suddenly expected to have X-ray vision and be able to see through the rubble to where Johann's body lay. Together the two stood looking until finally Yuri turned away toward Kei.

"If only we could have... YEEEEEEK!!"

Kei jumped and spun around, gun in hand, eyes blazing. "What? What?"

Eyes wide, mouth agape, Yuri slowly pointed to the one thing she had been too busy to notice until just now--

Kei's bathing suit.

II

"But it's not our fault!" the Dirty Pair cried simultaneously.

Director Gooly groaned inwardly. He was sure that the two of them practiced that line in front of a mirror every day. With a pained look he again gingerly lifted the cover of the damage report on his desk and winced when he saw the total. For the Pair it wasn't too bad, if they had been on a mission, but...

"All this, from a mall trip for some shoes?"



"And a bathing suit," Kei added. "I got this great-looking bikini..."

Gooly cleared his throat. "I've seen the police scene photos, thank you." The police photographer had been very efficient in his duties and had also appeared to be very appreciative of Kei's choice of swimsuits, since more than half of the photos had Kei somewhere in the shots. He had almost dropped the report the first time he had seen the photos. He was sure that somewhere, at this very moment, likenesses of Kei were appearing in police lockers everywhere.

Bringing his mind back to the present, Gooly lifted the second report on his desk and began to read aloud.

"Johann Scheer. Typical boy-makes-good story. Twenty-four years of age. Founder and CEO of Jutland/Scheer Brokerage. Major stockholder in over fifty major companies, mostly passenger and shipping lines. Total net worth of over..." He paused, seeming to disbelieve the figure on the paper. "Over three hundred and fifty million."

Kei whistled appreciatively. Yuri made a small whimpering noise Gooly couldn't quite place.

"Needless to say, everybody wants to know just what was going down in that parking lot. It didn't help that there weren't any survivors among the bad guys."

The Dirty Pair grinned sheepishly. "I got four of them to give up once," Kei volunteered. "But then the van blew up."

"She probably shot it herself," Yuri chided.

"I did not! The jerk with the assault weapon did," Kei retorted, then to Gooly: "Why don't we get some of those for us?"

Gooly wisely ignored the comment and banter and pressed onward. "Didn't any of them say anything?"

"They were too busy shooting at us."

"Or gawking at her," Yuri said, nodding toward Kei.

"Jealous again."

"Oh? I didn't see Johann asking you for a date."

"Maybe if he had seen me in that suit he would have."

The two continued back and fourth for a few more moments before they remembered where they were and stopped, glancing at the patient Gooly.

"Thank you. The police don't even want to pretend that this is their case, especially when the Dir... ahem, two of the WWWW's finest enter the picture. As far as they are concerned, the WWWW started this mess, the WWWW can get itself out."

"The police report says they got a tip that the Syndicate was involved," Yuri said.


"It's up to you two to find out if that's true," Gooly said. "Dig up something on Scheer. Find out what he was doing in the mall, besides trying to pick up Yuri. Try to give the police some reason for the start of a small war in downtown."

Gooly calmly appraised Yuri. "And I think just this once we'll waive the rule of not letting troubleshooters with a personal stake work on a case."

Yuri smiled softly. "Thank you."

"Okay. Dale has something for the two of you down in the morgue. See him before you go."





"Why is he always in the morgue?"

Yuri grinned at her partner's annoyance, making sure to keep her amusement hidden from Kei. "It's part of his job, Kei."

This obviously wasn't enough of an explanation for Kei. "I bet he does it just to annoy me. He's always around dead people."

Yuri stopped short outside of the morgue door and slowly turned to her partner.

"Kei, so are we."

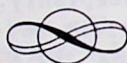
Kei froze at the statement. Yuri was treated to almost a minute of stunned silence before Kei could come back with a rejoinder.

"Yeah, but at least they start out alive when we meet them."



Dale, short for Daedalus, was the head of Technical Support for their WWA Headquarters. Daedalus was considered an expert in Ballistics, Chemistry, Forensics, Computers, Electronics, Weapons...

And getting Kei's goat.



It had started, like Yuri liked to think all great relationships started, very innocently with Master Blaster.

Master Blaster was what the troubleshooters called the Combat Situational Awareness Training System. The CSATS used a sophisticated holographic imaging system that could portray any situation from a hostage situation to a hijacking to a full-scale terrorist assault. The CSATS was designed to hone a troubleshooter's combat proficiency to perfection.

So, of course, all of the troubleshooters treated it as a game.

Kei in particular. Kei loved Master Blaster and made it a point to be sure that she alone held the top ten scores, a feat that her considerable skill made easy.

Then one day the Pair returned from a mission to discover that Kei had been vanquished from the top three spots by a mysterious MAZE. Kei took it in stride, since the scores were only slightly better than her own. Her next three runs easily surpassed the scores. A week later, MAZE had regained the third, fourth and fifth spot. The next week, he had crept back into the first two spots. Kei began to appreciate the challenge, along with the mystery of trying to discover who MAZE was.

It was the day that MAZE took over all ten spots that Kei began to be annoyed.

Actually, annoyed wasn't the word. The term "obsessed" readily came to Yuri's mind. Kei wouldn't rest until she beat the high scores, and found out who MAZE was. She badgered every troubleshooter she could find and was sure that all of them were in on the plot against her. Every free moment was spent practicing on Master Blaster. Now it wasn't enough to just beat MAZE's score, she had to make sure that MAZE would never beat her again. It took her three weeks before she finally scored a perfect run, not once, not twice, but three times.

By then some of the agents had discovered the secret identity of MAZE,

and thought it well worth the risk of Kei's wrath to hint on the fact. When at last Kei made her perfect runs they broke the news to her that she had been spending three weeks not trying to best another field operative, but a technician.

The next day Daedalus showed up in headquarters with a massive congratulatory bouquet of roses. Yuri saw Kei's heart soften for a moment, just before all the work and razing came to the surface and she read him the riot act. Twice. With visual aids.

Yuri knew that Daedalus must have seen it to, for he actually stayed around until Kei wound down. Then he had smiled, given her a kiss and left. Yuri had timed it; it had taken Kei a good three minutes before she lost the little half-smile on her face.

Yuri was sure it was just a matter of time.



Daedalus was intently studying something with a magnifying glass as the girls walked in. Yuri always liked seeing him like that, all of his attention focused on a task at hand.

Daedalus stood close to six feet, all of it so nicely proportioned that the cut of the lab coat could not hide it. He had a quiet, but strong face, with a sharp nose, and bright, clear gray eyes whose intensity were not hidden by his glasses. Light brown hair fell gently to his shoulders.

As the Pair approached him, they could see that he was handling a picture. It took Kei a second to recognize that it was a picture of her from the mall in all her bikinied glory.

"Where did you get that?" Kei yelped.

Daedalus grinned. "I have connections over at the police department. I think it's an excellent likeness, though it doesn't quite capture your natural essence, that elusive spark that--Oh no you don't!" he suddenly said as Kei snatched for the picture. The two dueling for a few seconds, with Kei finally triumphant, the picture safe in her hands.

"Oh, well," Daedalus said with a sigh, a dreamy look on his face. "I figure that with that suit's exposure, I was about 5mm from finding out if you're a natural redhead."

"Well, I can tell you that," Yuri ventured.

Kei shoved an elbow into her partner's ribs. "Don't encourage him! Now what is it you have to tell us?"

"It has to do with your friend over there," Daedalus said, nodding his head toward the room behind him. For the first time, the two noticed the shroud-covered figure on the examining table.

Yuri whimpered again.

"What about him?"

"Well--first of all, he's dead."

Kei rolled her eyes skyward. "Tell us something we don't know."


Daedalus grinned slyly at Kei. "Okay, I'm not wearing any underwear."

Yuri raised one eyebrow. "Really?"

"Stop encouraging him!"

Daedalus picked up a covered tray and placed it on the table in front of the girls. "What do you think this is?" he asked, whipping off the cover.

Yuri rapidly turned a vibrant shade of green. Kei noticeably paled. Both of them involuntarily took a step backwards.



"I don't care," Kei said, "As long as one: You don't tell me you're having it as lunch, and two: you get it out of my sight right now."

Daedalus ignored the threat. "What we have here are what would appear to be the internal organs of your average male. These, along with the rest of the body, would normally have been consumed by the explosion and resultant fire of his vehicle. However, as I am to understand it, you two smothered the fire with a parking garage."

Kei growled and Daedalus winked at Yuri as he continued, "Now I said 'appears to be' because closer examination shows that these organs are much smaller than they should be, with a size more normally associated with a male less than ten years old. Plus, these organs are almost completely non-functional."

"Wait a minute," Kei said. "Are you trying to tell me that this guy was walking around with the insides of a ten-year-old?"

"That's the point, my lovely. It is impossible for anyone to walk around with those insides. Therefore he--or, more appropriately, it--didn't walk anywhere."

"But then who was in the car?"

"A clone," Yuri said softly.

"Absolutely correct. To be exact, a force-grown clone. One that was designed to match your friend Johann from the outside only. The internal organs didn't matter, since all you were supposed to find was some charred remains."

"Then that wasn't Johann in the car when it exploded!" Yuri said, visibly brightening. "That means he might be still alive somewhere! Dale, I could kiss you!" And then, as if to prove her point, she did.

Daedalus grinned at Kei. "How about you, my lovely?"

"Fat chance," Kei grumbled. "That means that someone wanted us to think that he was dead," she pointed out. "And went through a lot of trouble to do it, too."

Yuri was already tugging at Kei's elbow. "Then let's find out who and why when we find him. Let's go. Thanks a lot, Dale!"

"Why do I feel like I've been down this road before?" Kei said to no one in particular as her partner dragged her out the door.

Daedalus watched the door, counting under his breath. "Five, four, three, two--"

At "one", the door swung open and Kei stuck her head in.

"And stop calling me your lovely!"

Daedalus grinned as the door slammed and he reached into the desk drawer, selecting another picture of Kei from the many that filled the drawer.

III

"Lovely Angel, Kei & Yuri. Three-W A."

Kristy Appleton brushed her pixielike blonde bangs from her green eyes as she stared blankly at the Pair, then at the displayed ID cards, then back at the girls. After a few seconds, her eyes went wide with recognition.



"WWWA? You... You're the Dirt-"

Her mouth gaped as wide as her eyes, and her hand belatedly flew up as if to force back what had escaped. Kei had a mental flash of Appleton's arm disappearing up to her elbow in that maw.

"I mean... Ah, you're the two who were in the garage when Johann--I mean Mr. Scheer was attacked."

Kei nodded. "We're following up on a few items and were wondering if you could help us in our investigation."

Appleton had somewhat recovered from her initial shock, but she still looked like she expected the ceiling to collapse at any second. Her eyes nervously jumped from Kei to Yuri to the holstered guns in their uniforms and then quickly to almost anywhere else.

"Well, Ahhh--" she started, then composed herself. "The police already asked a few questions. Does this mean that you guys...?"

"The WWWA just wants to hunt down a few loose ends," Yuri said, smiling sweetly.

"Oh! Well, let's go to my office then."

The executive offices of Jutland/Scheer were set in a large penthouse atrium filled with crystal pools, -scintillating waterfalls, and lush tropical plants under expansive glass roof panels. Colorful parrots watched the Pair as they followed their guide. Appleton kept looking nervously over her shoulder at the two, as if she expected them to suddenly rush off, committing random acts of violence. Yuri had to restrain her sudden urge to clap her hands to see if Appleton would make escape velocity when she jumped.

"I don't know what I could add," Appleton said when they safely reached her office. "I'm just one of the senior partners. What happened to Johann--Mr. Scheer was just terrible."

"Did he have any enemies?" Kei asked.

"Anyone in big business does, but around here they're usually of the type who say bad things behind your back at the club."

"Disgruntled former employees?"

"Everybody loved working with Jo--Mr. Scheer."

"Bitter rivalries?"

"No."

"Customers angry over bad investments?"

"Johann didn't make bad investments," Appleton said, maybe a bit too proudly.

"Was he working on anything special?" Yuri ventured.

Appleton paused, obviously thrown by the question. "Ahhh--I really wouldn't know that. We haven't had a chance to go through his papers and..." Her voice trailed off. "Maybe you had better talk to Jennai, she was Mr. Scheer's executive secretary."

Jennai showed up a few minutes after Appleton's buzz. She was a woman in her late twenty's, a buxom, full-figured woman with a head of red hair to rival Kei, though hers curled lightly as it fell to her shoulders. She stormed through the door, a sheaf of paper in her hands, giving the impression that she was someone who was always on the move.

"Jennai, this is..." Appleton started.

"The Dirty Pair!" Jennai shouted.

Appleton visibly flinched and started eyeing the desk as potential cover. The Pair started their oft-practiced rejoinder when Jennai continued.

"I don't believe it! I've always wanted to meet you two! Can I have your autographs?"



"We didn't know there was a Lovely Angel fan club!"

Jennai grinned, amused at the stereo effect of the two talking simultaneously. "It's not like it's official or anything. It just stared out as a joke between me and my boyfriend, but it's grown to include most of the secretarial pool."

They were in Scheer's office while Jennai activated the computer link on the large desk. As they talked, Kei's and Yuri's eyes roved among the office, taking in all they could.

"We were even joking about holding a dinner once a year. We might have even invited you two," she added with a sly grin. "We were just about to have a meeting about the garage incident when--when we heard about Mr. Scheer and, and..."

Jennai suddenly erupted into tears, and to Kei's amazement, Yuri joined her. Kei stood dumfounded, looking back and forth from her partner to Jennai. After a few moments she stepped between the two of them, wrapping her arms around their shoulders.

"There, there," she said softly, punctuating her point with a pinch on Yuri's shapely rear. Yuri yelped in surprise, then looked sheepishly at her partner.

"Sorry," she said under her breath, "I got carried away."

"Sorry about that," Jennai said, wiping her eyes. "Mr. Scheer was the best boss I ever had, and it's not going to be the same around here without him." She turned a sad face to Kei. "I hope the end wasn't painful for him."

Yuri sniffled. "He--he didn't feel a thing."

Kei instantly saw where this was starting to head and cut it off. "Can you tell us what he was working on?"

Jennai turned to the computer, glad to be doing something. "Mr. Scheer really didn't take too much of a hand in the running of the business, except for handling a few special accounts," she said as her fingers flew across the keyboard. "Mostly he steered the partners who handled the big accounts."

"Like Mrs. Appleton?" Yuri asked.

"Yeah, she's an excellent example. Handled most of the big boys as a matter of fact." A gleam returned to Jennai's eye as she looked up at the Pair. "As a matter of fact," she said in a low, conspiratorial tone of a woman sharing a secret, "she and Mr. Scheer had more than a little thing going together, if you know what I mean."

The Pair shared a telepathic glance and grinned.

"Johann--I mean Mr. Scheer," Kei said, mimicking Appleton's slips of the tongue.

"Exactly!" Jennai said, laughing. "Sometimes I think Mr. Scheer had as much fun as we did watching her try to hide the fact. She was wrapped around his finger. You know, we really thought she would go to pieces when we found out what happened, but she's held up pretty well. Who would have thought?"

"Anyway, here we go. His appointment schedule shows that he was pretty free for the last two weeks. A few notes on some accounts; some old, valued customers. All in all, nothing out of the ordinary. Now let's see what's in his secret files," she said with a wink.

"Secret files?" Kei asked, as Jennai's fingers tapped along.

Jennai grinned. "Mr. Scheer kept a separate file system for all of his sensitive material, i.e. all of the stuff he normally didn't want me to



see."

"You mean he didn't know you could access these files?"

"Nope. I did like any good executive secretary does and let him think I was part psychic. Now let's see... Knew that. Knew that. Knew that before he did. Knew--wait a minute." Jennai punched a few more keys, then whistled loudly. "Here's something. It looks like Mr. Scheer actually did take a hand in some investments: to the tune of some forty-five million."

"That sounds like a lot to me," Yuri said. "But that wouldn't really be a lot to this company, would it?"

"No, but it's a lot to keep secret. But..." Jennai paused as she opened another window on the display and retrieved another file. "It's an awful lot to invest in a company that went bankrupt a week ago."

The Pair moved behind Jennai, reading the news file she had pulled. "StarMark Avionics," Kei read aloud, "which had previously announced a major breakthrough in astronavigation software--blah, blah, blah--heuristics programming, blah, blah, blah--filed papers today--unavailable for comment--under investigation."

"Doesn't sound good," Yuri said.

"I've never heard of Mr. Scheer being so wrong before," Jennai said. "Forty-five million. I remember this account, but they were strictly nickel and dime before, a few thousand here and there for a week or two. Never anything this big."

"Can you print out this information for us?" Yuri asked.

"Well, I probably shouldn't, but..." One touch and the printer quietly started ejecting paper. "Just chalk it up to informed sources. I wonder what other surprises he has hidden in here?"

While Kei collected the papers, Yuri watched Jennai work. "What's that?" she said suddenly, pointing at the screen.

"Huh? Oh, just a stock transfer."

"Isn't that one of the stocks Johann was a major stockholder in?"

"Yeah, but that's nothing new. Wait a minute, here's another."

"And another."

"And another, and another, and still more." Jennai quickly searched through the system, marking all the transfers.

"Transfers? What does that mean?" Kei asked.

"Starting from the day after StarMark went under, and up to a week before his--accident, it looks like Scheer transferred some two hundred million--"

"Two hundred million, five hundred and sixty thousand to be exact," Jennai said.

"From private ownership to--what?" Yuri asked.

"He transferred ownership of the stocks to Jutland/Scheer, and then transferred an equal amount to a separate account."

"Is that illegal?"

Jennai looked at Kei with a questioning look. "No, it's not even immoral. Oh, I guess it's the type of thing you should tell the board of directors, but since he owns the company he doesn't really have to. It's just that..."

Kei looked at Yuri. "Just what?"

Jennai stared silently at the screen for a while before she finally spoke.

"It's just that's what I would expect someone to do, if they wanted a lot of money real fast--"

"Without anyone finding out."



StarMark Avionics was located in an industrial complex across the city from Jutland/Scheer. While Kei drove, Yuri perused the piles of printout they had received from Jennai, tossing out what she considered salient points to her partner as she found them. Along with all the information on the stock transfers, and the StarMark incident, they had wrangled data on just about all aspects of Scheer that could be found. Yuri was still flipping through the pile when Kei turned into the complex.

"This is beginning to make less and less sense the further we go," Yuri observed.

"Well," Kei said, pointing, "be prepared to be even more confused."

Yuri followed Kei's gesture. The front door of the StarMark office was sealed with distinctive, bright yellow "POLICE CRIME SCENE--DO NOT CROSS" tape.

"Maybe we should have done a little more checking through the news files."

"Now what?" Yuri asked.

"Well," Kei said, reaching for the door, "we can't get into any more trouble than we're already in."

"Remember what happened the last time you said that, we didn't see daylight for a week! Besides, we can't just break into a crime scene--"

The sound of something being dropped from inside the office cut Yuri off.

"Why not?" Kei said. "Someone else already did."

As one, the Pair drew their weapons. Kei led off, kicking the door open. To her surprise the door wasn't even locked, much less sealed. The force of her kick rocketed the door inward, where it bounced against the wall and rebounded back with a vengeance. Kei jumped sideways into the room as the door slammed shut beside her, her eyes and gun sweeping the room as one.

The front office looked like it at one time had been a sparsely, but tastefully decorated reception area. Now, it resembled nothing short of a disaster area. Chairs were overturned, with slashed cushions. The desk had been turned on one side, its drawers piled haphazardly in a corner. Pictures that had been hanging on the wall were scattered across the floor. Various swatches of the wallpaper had been torn off in ragged strips. Portions of the rug had been cut away, as if someone had let children with amorphous cookie cutters run wild over it.

Someone, Kei thought, did a serious job of treasure hunting here.

The door slowly swung open beside her. Yuri had not been quite as quick, and now she stood in the doorway; her gun in one hand, her nose in the other.


"Sorry about that," Kei said, grinning.

"I'm not speaking to you," Yuri said, though with her holding her nose it came out more like: "Dam nad speddin do youse."

"And it's a good thing, too. You sound terrible."

Yuri glared at her partner, then moved onward, with Kei following closely as they slipped down the hall. An open door at the end of the corridor opened up into a larger office. That was dominated by a large window behind a massive desk which, considering the state of the other





office, was reasonably intact. The rest of the office was suitably arrayed. Through the window, the girls could see the rest of the building. It was filled with what seemed to be manufacturing equipment, most of which appeared to be in operation, though no sound reached them through the glass.

Kei inhaled sharply and nudged Yuri. Yuri followed her partner's gaze.

On the surface of the desk in front of them was a tape outline of a spread-eagled body. Stains that seemed jet-black in the dimness all but filled the outline.

"Blood," Yuri said to the unasked question.

There was the sudden shattering of glass from somewhere behind the window. There was one door leading from the office and this time Yuri hit it. The latch sprung nicely and the two stepped through the door.

Into empty space.

Both froze in place, dumfounded. Where the scene through the office window had been one of a jam-packed factory floor, all that appeared to the girls was a totally empty building.

"There!" Kei shouted, breaking the spell. Clear across the building a pair of legs were just disappearing through a broken window.

Without a word between them, the Pair leaped into action. As Yuri sprinted toward the end of the building, Kei pivoted in place and ran back out to the front. Yuri charged down the floor and watched the silhouette of the intruder start running.

"To the right!" she yelled back at Kei as the figure ran toward the right side of the building. Yuri cut hard to her right and fired twice, shattering a window seconds before she leaped through it into the alley beside the building. She twisted catlike as she landed, spinning in time to see the door of the sedan at the rear of the building close.

"WWWA. Freeze!" she yelled, drawing down on the car. In response the car lifted and bore down on her. "Your funeral," Yuri said as she coolly sighted and fired into the hood.

She was moderately surprised when the bolts bounced.

She became extremely upset when her next shots into the windshield had about as much effect. Who the hell drove around in a blast-shielded sedan?

Yuri had no time to reflect on that question, for by then the car was almost right on top of her. A pivot and leap took her right back through the window as the car flashed by her. As she rustled up dustbunnies on the hardwood floor with her nose, she heard the sound of Kei's gun firing, and then the doppler whine of the car's engine receding into the distance.

"Damn!" she heard her partner shout. "Who the hell blast-shields a sedan?"

IV

"A scam? Mr. Scheer fell for a scam?" Jennai said, stunned.

"A very good one," Kei said. "There was a holographic display of a manufacturing plant, equipment mock-ups, the whole nine yards. Hell, this guy had even conned someone into loaning him a pleasure yacht for a display. He just changed the nameplates on the equipment. According to the police,

our Mr. Scheer wasn't the only one taken in."

"But he was the last one," Daedalus said, as he walked through the office door.

Kei's eyes flashed. "Who invited him?" she asked, giving Yuri a suspicious glance.

Yuri traded a knowing grin with Daedalus. "Somebody had to get the police report on StarMark," she said sweetly.

"Right here in my hot little hands."

"Well, keep your hot hands over there and tell us what it says."

Daedalus opened the report folder with a flourish. "It looks like the former president of StarMark, a Mr. Astic, turned up dead. No surprise. Actually quite messily dead, in the manner of someone who was unwilling or unable to answer very pointedly put questions."

Daedalus looked over the report at Kei. "There's some excellent quality pictures, professionally speaking, of course."

Kei's answer was to shoot him a look that could have re-fossilized Godzilla.

"Ouch. Anyway, Astic's departure from this mortal coil occurred just a few days after he rolled up StarMark, and just before he was able to grab the first starship out of Dodge. The conditions of his death, plus the ransacking of his house and the factory, which occurred after his death, leads one to believe that Astic did not reveal the location of the money he worked so hard for."

"And you two think that the forty-five million that Mr. Scheer invested into StarMark came from the Syndicate?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense in this entire case," Kei said. "Look, Scheer cuts a deal with the Syndicate, probably to launder money. They start with a few trial runs, to make sure everything is on the level, then they give him the forty-five mil. Then, either Astic just gets lucky, or he knows about the deal and makes his pitch for StarMark. Scheer invests the money, Astic cleans up. But before he can make good his escape, the Syndicate catches up to him."

"But the Syndicate doesn't recover the money and wants a refund, or maybe Scheer just doesn't like the idea that he might be next. So, he gets this great idea on how he can disappear..."

"He set us up," Yuri said, half to herself. Then loudly: "That son-of-a-bitch set us up!!"

"Temper, temper," Daedalus said. "If I follow my love's--"

"Stop saying that!"

"--Logic," Daedalus continued without pause, "it didn't matter who it was that followed him into the garage that day."


"Exactly. See, there were too many people in the attack group for a hit, and they were too well armed for a kidnapping. He hired those men to fake an attack on him. All he needed was for someone to witness the attack and his 'death' and then he could disappear with the profit from his stock switch."

"So that only leaves one question," Yuri said through clenched teeth. "Where is he?"

Kei sighed. "That's the problem. He could be anywhere by now. I can't think of a single reason for him to have spent another second on this planet, once everyone thought he was dead."

"I can," Jennai said.

All eyes turned toward her. Jennai realized she was on the spot and froze for a second, then quickly continued.



"The stock transfer. Look, technically the money is still here--well, in the system, anyway. See, almost anyone can transfer the money around from one department to the other, but you need special access privileges to make it actually payable to someone." She sat down at the terminal and punched through the files. After a few moments work, she swiveled the screen for all to see.

"Here, the money is still only electronic. Jutland/Scheer owns the stock, Scheer's account is credited the worth of the stock, but until it's made payable to someone, he can't touch it."

"But doesn't he have the power to make that happen?" Daedalus asked.

"He did--when he was alive."

"So who else has that power?"

"Just a few people, the Chief Financial Officer, some of the board members..."

"Some of the senior partners?" Yuri asked.

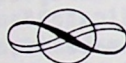
"Yeah, a few of the senior--"

"Appleton!!" the three women said as one.

Kei slapped her fist into her hand. "It's so perfect! He disappears, she waits a while, then she takes the money and they run away together."

"And if anybody found out," Daedalus added, "it would just look like she stole the money on her own. There would be no way to tie it to the poor, dead Mr. Scheer."

"Wow," Jennai said. "I just helped the Dirty Pair solve a mystery!"



"Think she'll be nervous enough to go right to Johann?"

Kei raised an eyebrow in question, and re-adjusted the rearview mirrors of the car again as they sat in the parking lot of Jutland/Scheer.

"You saw how nervous she was just having us in the same building asking questions. If Jennai can really make her feel that we're onto something, she should at least try to contact him, if not run right to him."

"I hope she leads us right to him, so I can get my hands on him."

"I've heard that before."

"Yeah, but this time I'm going to wring his neck!"

"You might get your wish, 'cause there she is."

The two watched Appleton as she walked out of the building. She walked in a straight, no-nonsense clip right to her car, looking neither right nor left. As Appleton pulled out, Kei dropped into traffic a respectable distance behind her.

The Pair followed Appleton as she drove her way efficiently through the early evening traffic. Yuri consulted their direction of travel on a moving map display.

"What do you think?" Kei asked.


"Look's like she's heading home. Think maybe she's got Johann stashed there?"

"I would if I was her." Kei had been paying more and more attention to her rearview mirrors. "I think there's someone you'll recognize behind us. Check the right hand lane, about four cars back."

Yuri adjusted the mirror on her side and saw a familiar sight.

"That's the car that almost ran us down back at StarMark!"

"It's been following us since we left Jutland/Scheer."



"Great, another country heard from. If this case gets any more complicated, we're going to need a scorecard. Let's just keep an eye on whoever it is, and watch Appleton."

Appleton continued onward, and straight as an arrow headed for her home. As she pulled into her driveway, Kei drove past and parked across the street. The mystery sedan stayed behind them, pulling into a driveway down the street.

"Strike one," Kei said. "Right to her home."

The two watched as Appleton entered her home. They sat and watched the house for five minutes before they acted.

"Here we go with the second pitch," Yuri said as they left the car and headed toward the house.



To say that Appleton was shocked to find the Dirty Pair on her doorstep would have been putting it very mildly. There was an almost-perfect instant replay of her expression from the first time she saw them.

"Wha-wha-wha--" she stammered.

"Hello, Mrs. Appleton," Yuri said, beaming her best public servant smile. "We're just here to clear up a few things."

"Wha-what?"

"Mind if we come in?"

"C-Come in?"

"Don't mind if we do," Kei said, slipping past the still-gaping woman. Appleton started to stammer an objection, but Yuri slipped up beside her, taking her arm in hand.

"You see, Mrs. Appleton, it looks like the Syndicate had a direct involvement in the death of Mr. Scheer. It appears that Scheer had some dealings with members of the Syndicate, and might have used his position in the company to their favor. Now, we're not sure yet if he ever did anything illegal, or if anybody else in the company was involved."

The last statement seemed to strike a nerve in Appleton. "Anybody else? You mean like accomplices?"

"Yes. See, if there was anybody else involved with him in this, it's possible that they might be in the same danger that Scheer was."

Appleton took an involuntary step back, as if she suddenly realized that she was in danger standing in an open doorway. Behind her, Yuri saw Kei return from her quick search of the house, a semi-disappointed look on her face. She shook her head at Yuri, Scheer wasn't there. Strike two, she thought.

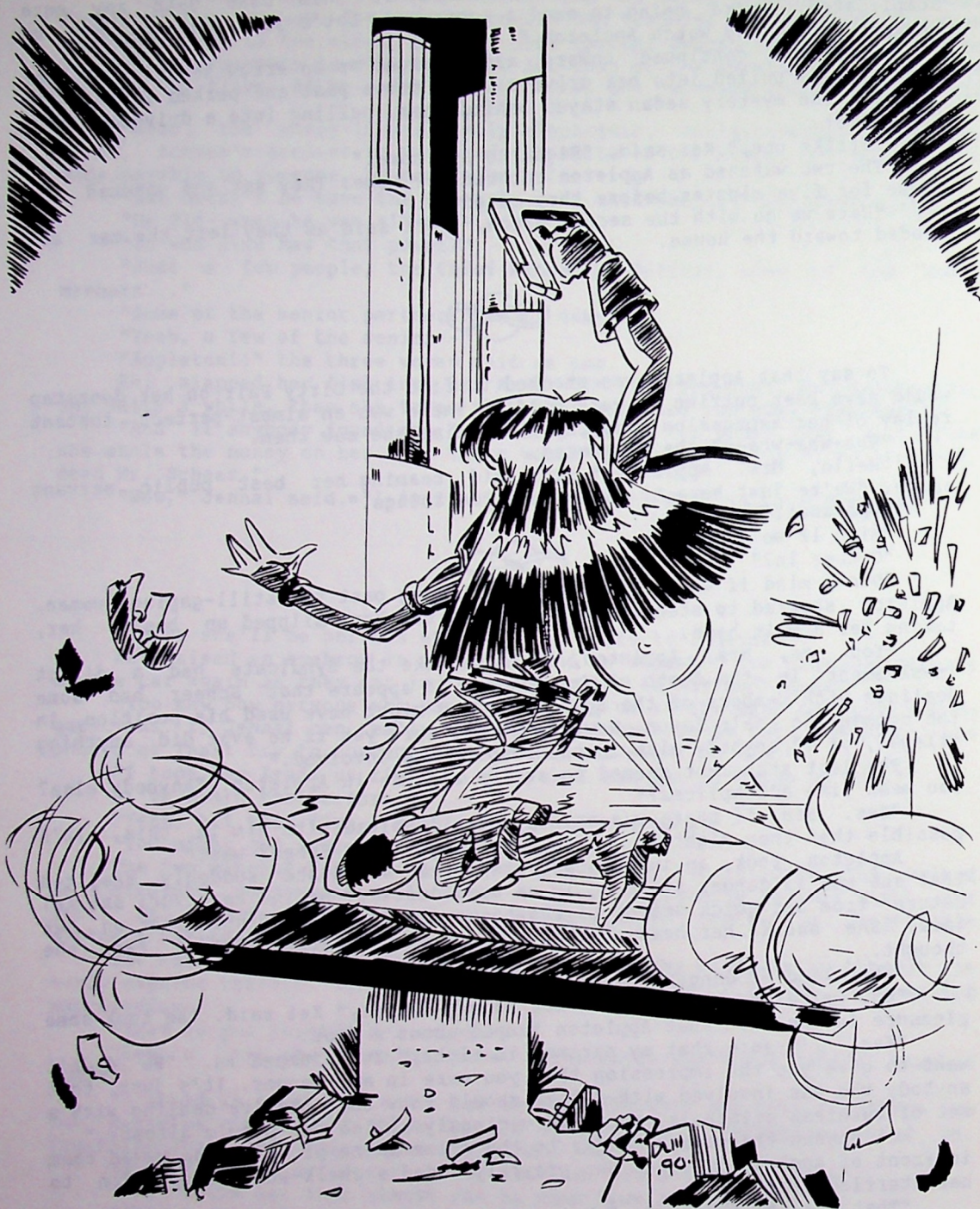
"What kind of danger are you talking about?"

"Oh, we're sure that you're not in any danger," Kei said. She took some pleasure in the fact that Appleton jumped about a foot.

"Yes, I'm sure that my partner is right," Yuri jumped in. "We didn't want to give you the impression that you were in any danger. It's just that anybody who was involved with Scheer should know that they're dealing with a set of ruthless criminals, who have viciously killed two people already."

Kei opened the police folder to the crime scene pictures and waved them in front of Appleton's face. She promptly added a chalk-white complexion to her startled features.

"That was the first one," Kei said.



"And have reason to believe that they would think nothing of committing further crimes to reach their ends."

"But you shouldn't have any problem with that," Kei said, opening the door.

"Yes," Yuri said, turning up her public service smile a notch. "No problem at all. Have a good night now."

The two left her as they had found her, standing in the doorway with a dumfounded look on her face. The Pair were actually able to make it back to the car before they broke up laughing.

A few moments after the Dirty Pair's car drove off the sedan started up and took off after them. Neither of them saw the third and fourth cars that pulled into line behind them.



"Ready?" Kei asked.

Yuri checked her equipment and unlocked her car door. "Ready."

"Okay, next corner."

Kei took the next corner at speed, then as she left the line of sight of the tailing sedan, she suddenly braked hard. Yuri was out of the door before the car had slowed to half its speed and crouched between two parked vehicles as the car continued its deceleration down the street.

Twenty seconds later the sedan took the turn. As planned, the driver was startled to see the Pair's car standing still in the street. The driver stood on his brakes and the car screeched to a halt right in front of where Yuri crouched.

Yuri sprang forward from hiding, a thick square of plastic in her hands, which she slapped on the passenger side window. There was an almost silent bang, a flash, then the window fell into the car. Yuri was right behind it, diving into the window up to her waist, her gun extended in her hands up to the driver's ear.

"Please don't move," Yuri said softly. "This hasn't been a good week."

The driver was a young woman. She had sun-blond hair that fell past her shoulders to an undetermined length. She turned a round face toward Yuri. She had large blue-green eyes, a upturned nose with a smattering of freckles, and full, but slightly pale lips. A few casual, but expensive, pieces of jewelry said "money" in a subtle way.

The woman froze, her hand poised in mid-flight towards the gearshift. Outside, Kei put her car in reverse and pulled up on the opposite side of the driver, leveling her gun through the opened passenger window.

"In case it has escaped your attention," Yuri continued, "you've been following the WWA troubleshooters 'Lovely Angel'. Now, who might you be?"

The woman tilted her head to break contact with the gun muzzle.


"Maxina," she said through clenched teeth.

"Good," Yuri said smoothly. "Now for question two: Why are you following us?"

Maxina opened her mouth to speak--

And a car slammed into the rear of Maxina's car. The car jerked forward and Yuri tipped forward face-first into the well between the bucket seats. There was another jolt as the car behind them pushed again, then Maxina slapped the car into first gear.

"Who the hell is that?" Yuri said, then: "Stop the car!" to Maxina.



In response, Maxina slapped the car into second gear (knocking Yuri on the side of the head with the gearshift) brought the car around hard in a bootleg turn, and pressed a button. The door Yuri was still draped through clicked open, and centrifugal force flung the door, and Yuri outward.

Yuri's response was to shoot. She fired right through the car's steering column, snapping the wheel off in Maxina's hands. Then she grabbed the handle inside the door and flipped through the window frame onto the street just seconds before the door slammed shut from sideswiping a parked car. The car wove wildly back up the street toward Kei and the third car.

The first crash came not from Maxina, but from Kei ramming into the third car, driving it into a store front. Maxina's car actually made it around the corner before Yuri heard it smack into something.



Kei was yelling at life, the universe and everything in general as she leaped out of the car. The party crasher's car had ended up backwards in a storefront. As she leaped, the front doors opened and two men piled out. Kei thought that they might as well have had neon signs on their chests saying "GOON" in big red letters. Somehow, she wasn't surprised.

A single leap took her to the hood of their car. Another leap would have taken her clean over the head of the driver, except for the fact that she dropped her knee into his nose as she sailed overhead. As she continued past, the rear door snapped open into her path. It was exactly the type of move she would have made, so she was prepared for it. Grabbing the top, she flipped over the door and the man behind it, then as she landed, she let loose a vicious side-kick that slammed the man into the door.

As he went down, Kei finally drew her gun and turned it on the two wide-eyed faces across the roof of the car.

"Somebody has better have a good explanation for what's been going on here," she yelled. "I have a very itchy trigger finger."



Yuri trotted back to where Kei stood guard over the four men, panting slightly.

"That darn car went four blocks before it finally stopped!" she said. "She was gone before I got there."

"That's okay," Kei said, gesturing with her gun. "We've got these guys here. It seems they have a proposition for us."


The leader of the group appeared to be the driver, who was still nursing a bloody nose.

"Ahhh, I and my companions here work for Mr. Elder."

Kei and Yuri exchanged glances. "Would that be the Mr. Elder?" Yuri asked. "The infamous Mr. Elder of Syndicate fame?"

"Mr. Elder understands that you two have been asking questions about him and his friends. He extends his invitation to you to meet him tonight." The driver's head moved in cycles; when he talked he looked at the girls, when he listened he kept his head tilted back to try to stem the blood flow.

"Your boss has a weird way of asking women out," Kei said.



"Besides," Yuri added, "I don't really think we have anything to talk about."

"Mr. Elder thinks otherwise. He has some information that may be useful to you."

"Well, he's going to have a hard time convincing us of that."

"He can tell you how to find Scheer."

"Formal or evening wear?"

V

"Why?"

The Dirty Pair had just arrived at the designated meeting place in the business district of the city.

"Why did it have to be here?"

The two were outside of a parking garage.

"I hope this isn't his idea of a joke," Kei continued.

"Come on," Yuri said. "Even we can only destroy one parking garage in a lifetime."

"I know I'm going to haunt you with the statement one day."

The Pair drove into the garage, and after a cursory glance from the goon at the gate, were directed to the fifth level of the garage.

The fifth level seemed totally devoid of cars at first, until a pair of flashed headlights beckoned from the building's center. Kei slowly drove forward until the two cars were facing each other with a twenty-foot gap in between.

The doors of both cars opened together. Kei and Yuri exited as three men left the limo in front of them. Only two of the men walked forward, the driver staying by the door.

The Pair studied the Syndicate chieftain as he walked forward into the light. None of the surveillance pictures did him justice. he was a man of medium height, but his lightly grayed hair and still-rugged figures exuded an air of stature that matched the power he commanded.

"Lovely Angel, I presume?" Elder said softly. "I have heard much about you two."

"And we could say the same about you," Yuri said, in an equally low voice.

Kei nodded her head toward the man who accompanied Elder. "Who's that, your lawyer?"


"Just a technical nicety, in case of legal trouble down the line."


"In other words..."

"This meeting never took place. As a matter of fact, there's six outstanding citizens who will swear that I'm having dinner with them right now. So you see, I have nothing to fear."

Yuri leaned closer. "Then why are we whispering?"

Elder look slightly startled for a second, then he erupted into a throaty laugh. "I'm sorry, too many old movies." He smiled at the girls. "Now then, to business. Why have you been asking around about my organization?"





"Why were your men following us?" Kei asked in return.

"What do you know about my missing money?"

"What do you know about Scheer's whereabouts?" Yuri fired back.

"Do you know if he was working with Astic?" Elder retorted.

"Why do the stars twinkle?" Kei said in frustration.

"Atmospheric distortion."

The Pair and Elder looked at the lawyer in something akin to stunned silence.

"Well, somebody had to answer something!" he said defensively

Elder erupted in laughter again. "Good man. That's why I keep him around," he said to the girls. "Carson here is that rare creature, a direct lawyer."

"He is correct in his observation. Let me get to the point. As I'm sure you two realize by now, Scheer and I had a deal, one that involved a very large amount of money. I was understandably upset when I discovered the whiz kid not only lost the money, but lost the money to some two-bit con artist."

"So you tortured the con artist--" Kei said.

"Let's just say strenuously questioned."

"And when he died without revealing what he did with the money--" Yuri said.

"An unfortunate occurrence."

"You decided to take it out of Scheer's hide," Yuri finished.

"Completely untrue. While a few in my organization forwarded the theory that Mr. Scheer was involved in the crime, I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Thus, I proposed an--alternate, shall we say?--form of payment."

"An alternate payment?"

"More like a favor really. A simple act, for which I would have forgiven him any crimes."

"However, it would seem that Scheer did not appreciate my offer of mercy, and instead concocted this ludicrous plan of framing me for his death and fleeing with money which rightfully belonged to me."

"Okay, I see your stake in this," Kei said. "But what does that have to do with us? Why would you be willing to give Scheer to us? What's in it for you?"

"I can tell you that!" A female voice called out of the darkness behind the Pair.

The girls swung around as a figure strode through the darkness toward them.

"Maxina!" Elder shouted with irritation.

Maxina arrogantly stepped past the Pair and stood facing Elder.

"Daddy, I am so tired of you playing these games," she said.

"Daddy?" the Pair said in unison.

"This is my slightly headstrong, very stubborn daughter; who sometimes doesn't know what's good for her," Elder said through clenched teeth.

"You mean what you think is good for me," Maxina retorted. She spun to face the girls. "Do you want to know what his 'favor' was? To marry me off to Scheer!"

"You need to settle down!" Elder shouted. "It's not good for you to run around like you do."

"Well, maybe if you would get a normal profession--"

"This is a family business here!"

"Wait a minute!" Kei said, stepping between Maxina and her father. "We are not here to listen to a family dispute! I just want this case to be over



with!"

"Look, Maxina," Elder said, "can we please talk about this later. I'm trying to conduct business here."

"Business! We're talking about my life here! No wonder Johann was worried about our relationship. He knew you'd try to take advantage of it!"

She turned to the Pair. "I met Johann sometime after my father had made his first business deal. I didn't tell him who I was, 'cause stupid me thought that he would try to take advantage of our relationship. We had a wonderful time on our own, and we fell in love on our own. Then daddy here found out about it, and he thought he had a way to kill two birds with one stone."

She turned back to her father, eyes blazing. "Johann did the right thing in trying to leave like he did. I hope he gets away with it, too."

"Well, that's what I'm trying to discuss with these two ladies here. Now if you'll let me finish--"

One of the guards suddenly shouted. Every turned and watched as he let loose with an impressive burst of fire.

The return fire was even more impressive, a burst of blaster fire that vaporized the goon and flashed across the level. There was an ear-splitting roar as a starship suddenly hove into view outside the building. A spotlight suddenly speared the group from the ship.

"Oh, no," Yuri said simply.

Kei recognized the ship as a standard small business ship. Even though it was small, its weapons were more than powerful enough to level the building. Everybody was reminded of this fact as the lower turret swung in their direction. Everybody dived for cover as the next burst proceeded to shred Elder's limo.

"Not this time!" Kei yelled as she dived with Yuri behind their car. A slap of her hand opened the trunk and Kei pulled out her own brand spanking new assault rifle. As the spotlight turned to track one of Elder's bodyguards, Kei leaned across the trunk and fired. The spotlight winked out in a blue-white flash, and the starship dropped out of sight. But not out of mind; the sound of its guns engaging more of Elder's guards quickly reached their ears.

"Quick, into the car!" Yuri yelled. Everybody was eager to follow her order, and in moments the car was overloaded. Kei stood onto the rear bumper as the car jerked to a start. Yuri expertly streaked to the ramp and down it, fender scraping on a wall.

The starship was waiting for them on the next level.

Kei and the turret opened fire as one as Yuri swerved hard. A support pillar saved them from the blast, while Kei's shots had no obvious visible effect.


Yuri drove hard toward the next down ramp as the starship dropped another level. They were just entering the ramp when the ship's turrets spoke again and the ramp disappeared below them in a cloud of vaporized concrete.

"Up. Up!" Kei yelled. Yuri slammed into reverse scant inches from the gap, then screamed backwards.

"Get to the roof!" Kei continued as she sniped at the starship, preventing it from getting a clear shot at them. She vaguely wondered if there was something about garages that meant she was always going to end up out-gunned.

Yuri actually beat the starship to the roof. The pilot made the mistake of appearing a few seconds afterwards and Kei cut into him with the assault





rifle. The ship spun away hard, the turret snapping off a burst of fire that Yuri easily avoided.

"We can't dodge him up here forever!" Elder yelled.

"We don't have to," Yuri said, pointing.

As the starship began to move in again, an arrowhead-shaped silhouette suddenly blocked the sky above them. Like some large and deadly bird of prey the Lovely Angel suddenly appeared over the building, running and landing lights blazing. There was almost no comparison, the Angel out-massing the business ship by more than five to one. There was no comparison in weaponry. As they watched, the Angel's beam cannon swung toward the ship.

Kei's spoke through her earlink, her voice booming out of the Lovely Angel's PA speakers.

"Give it up! Land that ship immediately!"

There was a frozen moment as the ship hung suspended in the air, then there was a sudden flare from one of the maneuvering jets as it started to spin away.

"Hit him, Mugh!" Kei yelled.

The Angel's cannon blazed. The bolt struck the rear of the business ship, blowing through its engine room. It dropped like the proverbial rock, slamming onto the roof with such force that the car jumped some five feet into the air from the shock, the nose of the ship breaking through the roof. Yuri was out the door before the car touched back down, racing toward the downed ship. The hatch had sprung slightly from the crash, now Yuri pried it open and slipped into the ship.

There was a heavy ozone smell, mixed with the odor of burning plastic and rubber insulation. Dim emergency lights illuminated the empty luxury cabin. Yuri moved stealthy along the downward slope of the aisle to the bridge. Testing the door, and finding it open, she flung it open and rolled inside.



While the nose section of the ship had taken the brunt of the crash, it was still remarkably intact. The forward bulkhead was cracked, and the floor buckled inward. Many of the instrument panels had popped free, exposing their internal circuitry. The forward viewscreen was still active, showing a canted view of the garage interior. Yuri quickly took it all in, but her sole attention was on the two forms in the command seats.

Yuri moved to the right hand side and spun it. The still, but obviously unconscious form of Appleton faced her, cocooned in the seat's emergency restraint system.

Yuri knew who would be in the other seat before she turned it.

Johann Scheer.


"Home run," she said to no one in particular.

As she watched, Scheer's eyes slowly flickered open. As he recognized the face before him, a weary smile crossed his face.

"I should have recognized you when I first saw you," he said softly. "There can be only one face as lovely as that one."

"Charming to the end," Yuri replied. "How did you know where we were?"

Scheer nodded toward Appleton. "She called me as soon as she got home. I got there just as you two left, so I followed you. I was there when you had the run-in with Maxina and her father's goons and I heard where the



meeting was going to be."

Scheer closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "I panicked, just like I panicked when I realized that I had been suckered by Astic. I thought that if I waited till after the meeting, then took out Elder... But then that guard saw me and I didn't have an option anymore." He looked at the gun in Yuri's hand. "I guess you don't have any options either."

Yuri re-holstered her gun. "All of my options were gone from the moment you kissed me in that store."

The smile broadened. "I still think you would have looked better in that suit than your friend."

"Can I quote you on that?"

"I'll swear to it at the trial." A questioning look came into his eyes. "There is going to be a trial, isn't there?"

"Do you know something I don't?"

"Not really. I just think that Elder has reason to be very mad."

"Well, believe me, Maxina's even madder. I just don't know if it's at you or her father." Yuri looked directly into Scheer's eyes. "She loves you, you know."

Scheer sighed. "And I love her."

"What about Appleton?"

"Krissy? There wasn't anything between us. I needed her to help with my plan, and we agreed that the best way for us to work together was to let everybody think we were having a fling. No, it's Maxina that I love, but I couldn't be the son-in-law of a Syndicate chieftain and still be credible in my business. Then when he tried to force me to marry her..."

"Well, you know something," Yuri said. "I don't think you'll have to worry about your image anymore."

"Not for the next twenty to thirty years anyway," Scheer said.

"So," Yuri continued, "I think I have an idea."

"What?"

"Oh, something. But it's going to cost you."

"What?" Scheer repeated.

This time, Yuri kissed him.

It was just as electric, just as lightning-like as it had been the first time. It was no longer the kiss of a stranger, but that feeling was replaced by the thrill of the hunt come to an end.

There was a polite cough from the hatchway, and Yuri turned to see Kei standing in the door, a huge grin on her face.

"No, no. Don't let me disturb you," she said. "I just thought that someone might need some help here. It's obvious that my partner here, however, had everything well in hand."


Yuri grinned back. "Tell her about the suit," she said to Scheer.



"Okay, Mughi," Kei said after they had gotten Scheer and Appleton out of the wreck. "You can pick us up now."

The Lovely Angel slowly approached, its lights illuminating the waiting group as it descended. Kei looked around at the damage revealed in the light. Lucky there were no cars up here, she thought. With all this damage the added weight would have...

Horror-struck, she looked up at the Angel as the landing gear extended



from its belly.

"No! Wait!" she cried. "Mughi, don't--"

With a blast of exhaust, the Lovely Angel touched down.

"--land."

The result was almost instantaneous. With a groan the Pair were sure they had heard before, the roof under the Angel began to collapse. Responding to Kei's belated warning with a plaintive cry that Kei could hear over the earlink, Mughi instantly tried to lift back off, only adding to the problem as the thrust from the lifters hammered the tarmac. Like a slow-moving wave the roof crumbled away toward the group.

Nobody wasted breath shouting warnings. As one, the group ran across the roof to a neighboring building. Behind them the parking garage slowly disappeared in a cloud of dust and debris.

"Don't say a word," Yuri panted at Kei.

VI

"--Take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

Scheer turned and looked at Yuri. Yuri looked up from the bouquet in her hands, a smile lighting up her face, a sparkle filling her eyes. She nodded her head almost imperceptibly.

"I do," Scheer said to the pastor.

Yuri barely heard what followed as her mind took in her surroundings; the look and fragrance of the multitude of flowers, the soft organ music in the background, the muted, colorful light that flowed through the stained glass windows, and more than anything else, the sheer presence of the man she stood next to now. She almost missed the priest's next question.

"--Lawfully wedded husband, in sickness and in health, till death due you part?"

"I do," Maxina said.

The rest of the ceremony, what little of it there was, flowed past. When Scheer kissed Maxina a cheer rang out and flashbulbs and champagne corks popped. Yuri and Kei looked at each other past the kissing newlyweds, both of their eyes moist.

"I love weddings," Yuri observed, and Kei nodded in agreement.

"Do you think it'll work out?" she asked, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Why not? Johann and Maxina get each other. Elder gets his daughter married off, so he keeps his end of the bargain and forgets about the forty-five million. Johann names Appleton as the new CEO of Jutland/Scheer in his absence, so she's happy. And since he really hasn't done anything illegal, Johann still gets to keep all of his stock money."

"For when he gets out of jail," Kei said somberly. "In twenty years or so."

"We can put in a good word for him."

Kei's eyes widened. "A good word for him! After we've destroyed two parking garages, a starship, and who knows how many cars? Who's going to put



DLH-90



in a good word for us?

"And let's not forget," she said looking at the two still-kissing newlyweds, "about hiding these two lovebirds out for a week for their honeymoon. If Gooly ever finds out, he'll have our pretty little hides!"

As if they heard their names mentioned, Scheer and Maxina turned to the Pair, their eyes sparkling.

"I want to thank you two for--everything," Scheer said.

"We'll never forget you two for letting us have this time together," Maxina added. "Even if it is only going to be a week."

"A lot can happen in a week," Kei said with a wink.

"Just as long as what doesn't happen is you two skipping out on us," Yuri said. "Or else it'll be the two of us coming after you."

"I don't think I could survive that twice," Scheer said. "I don't think there's a tradition of the bridegroom kissing the Bestwoman and the Maid of Honor, so I'm going to start one now." What that he kissed them both, and left them with wide grins on their faces as he and his bride mingled with the guests.

"He's worth it," Kei said.

"Definitely," Yuri agreed. "I'm going to have to shop for shoes more often."

"Oh, like you're always going to meet some gorgeous guy while buying shoes. Besides, if I remember correctly, it was while I was trying on suits that the fateful meeting took place."

"A mere technicality."

"And I bet you told him to say that about you and the suit."

"What? Wishing before your birthday?"

All around them, the wedding guests cheered as Elder led the reception in a toast to the newlyweds. A glass was placed in both of their hands, yet both were too busy to notice.

"Just how many shoes do you need, anyway?"

"Men like good women in good shoes."

"Sure, if you want to date a guy with a foot fetish. I'd rather have men who're attracted to my obvious charms."

"Your 'obvious charms' were what kept popping out of that 'bathing suit'. But if you must think of it that way, it looks like you've been putting on some extra 'charm'."

Around them, there were sounds of glee as the females arranged themselves as Maxina prepared to throw her bouquet.

"Me? You're the one who keeps raiding the fridge at night."

"I do not! It must have been Mughi who--"

"Don't give me that line about Mughi again. Even he wouldn't eat an entire gallon of Rocky Road."

"It was only two pints and...Oooops."

"A-ha!"

There were cries of encouragement as Maxina turned her back to the crowd.

"Well, you're the one that used all the whipped cream."

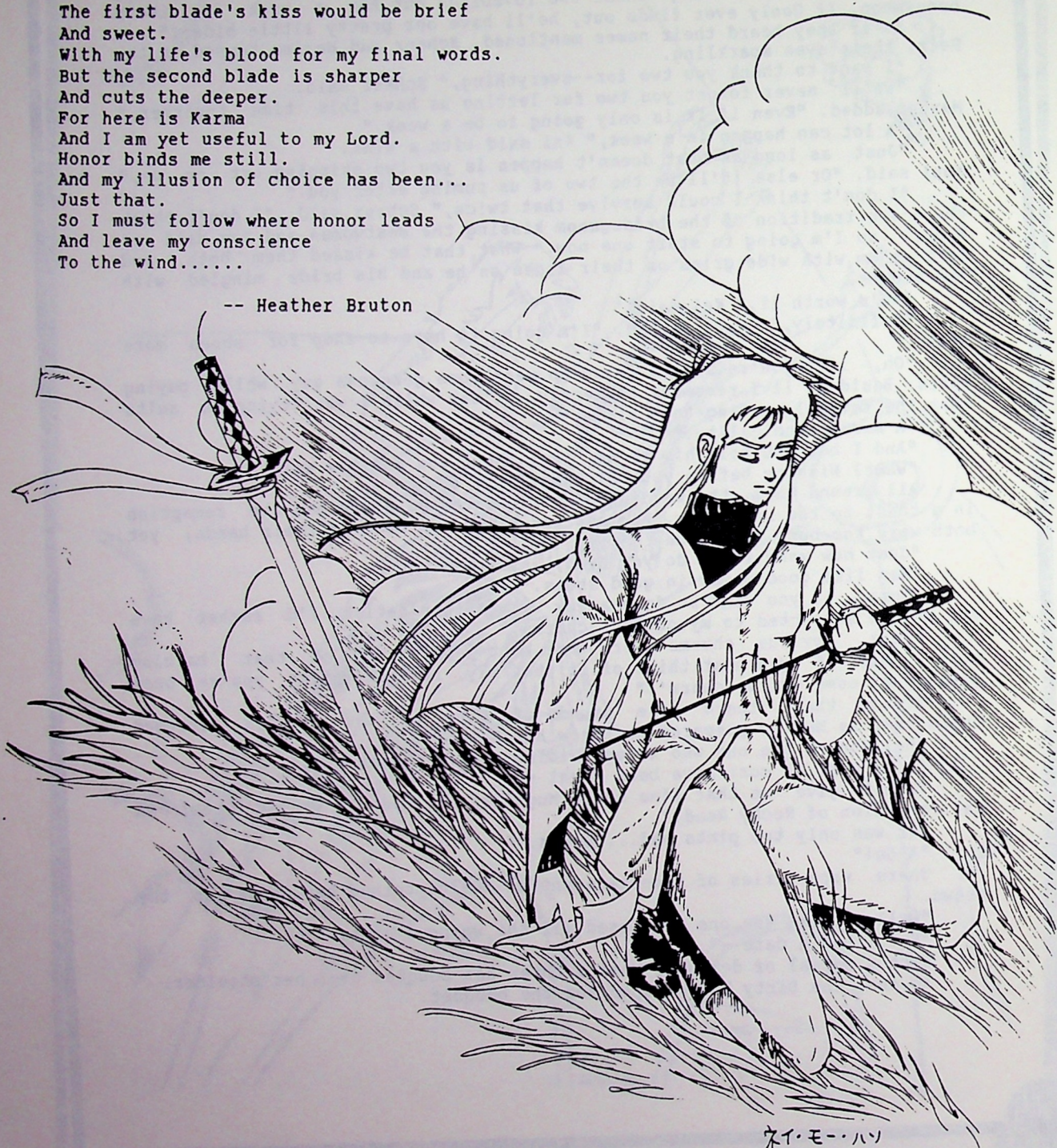
"But I had a date--"

With a squeal of delight, Maxina threw her bouquet over her shoulder. As one, the Dirty Pair leaped for the bouquet.

end

Two blades,
One the blade of conscience,
One the blade of honor.
And mine the will to choose between.
The first blade's kiss would be brief
And sweet.
With my life's blood for my final words.
But the second blade is sharper
And cuts the deeper.
For here is Karma
And I am yet useful to my Lord.
Honor binds me still.
And my illusion of choice has been...
Just that.
So I must follow where honor leads
And leave my conscience
To the wind.....

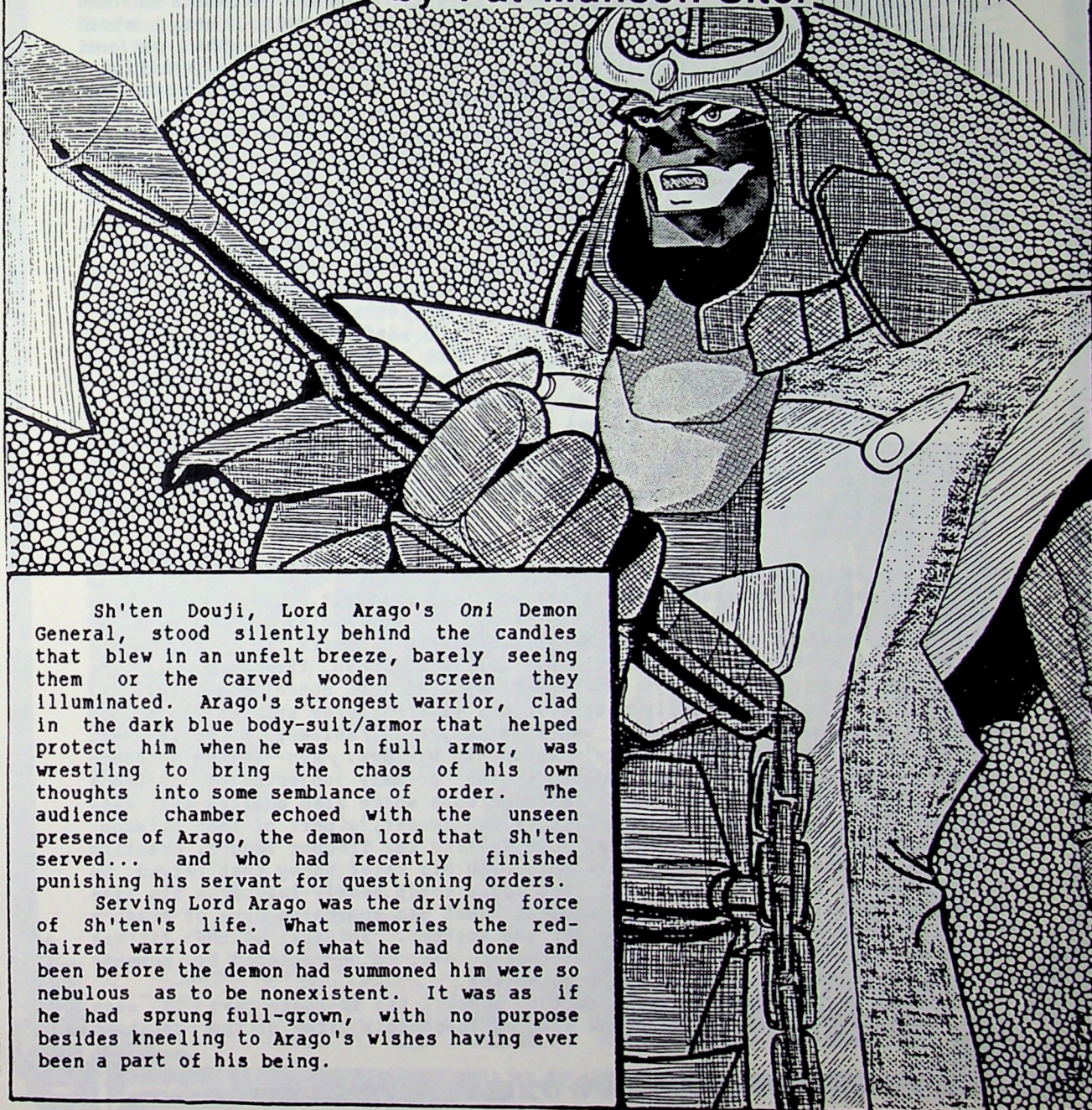
-- Heather Bruton



ネイ・モー・ハリ
95

Dark Thoughts by Candlelight

by Pat Munson-Siter



Sh'ten Douji, Lord Arago's Oni Demon General, stood silently behind the candles that blew in an unfelt breeze, barely seeing them or the carved wooden screen they illuminated. Arago's strongest warrior, clad in the dark blue body-suit/armor that helped protect him when he was in full armor, was wrestling to bring the chaos of his own thoughts into some semblance of order. The audience chamber echoed with the unseen presence of Arago, the demon lord that Sh'ten served... and who had recently finished punishing his servant for questioning orders.

Serving Lord Arago was the driving force of Sh'ten's life. What memories the red-haired warrior had of what he had done and been before the demon had summoned him were so nebulous as to be nonexistent. It was as if he had sprung full-grown, with no purpose besides kneeling to Arago's wishes having ever been a part of his being.



Lately, however, Sh'ten had been confused by stray thoughts that came, unbidden, to distract him from his duties... sometimes even in the middle of combat with the hated Samurai Troopers. The Troopers, servants of the priest-mage, Kaos, stood squarely in the way of Arago's ambitions. "Samurai Trooper bastards," he snarled to himself, aware even as he did so that there was a growing doubt in his mind about that judgment.

His past battles with the Troopers were fresh in his mind, along with the pain of shattered pride and embarrassment at his defeats at their hands. Defeats which his three fellow demon generals had taken special delight in tormenting him about. The fact that none of the other three had had any more success in eliminating the danger the Samurai Troopers represented to Arago did little to assuage Sh'ten's

feelings. As the most powerful of the four who fought for Arago, he should have done much better than the other three in this effort. Only in the most recent battle had he done well; and that small victory was as much a result of the power of Arago's black priests as it was his own efforts.

He closed his eyes, and immediately the face of Ryo, the leader of the Troopers, sprang to mind. Ryo had been catapulted into space as a result of that last battle, accidentally caught in one of the energy spheres Arago had aimed at another of the Troopers, who hung suspended, asleep, in orbit--held in place by the mystic forces Arago's opponents wielded. Ryo--Sh'ten's counterpart it sometimes seemed, and one of the primary objects of Sh'ten's hatred. Yet there was a part of Sh'ten's persona which also admired and respected the Samurai Trooper as both fighter and leader, a part of the crimson-haired fighter that had perhaps even come to like the Trooper leader, creating a love-hate dichotomy in his relationship with his chief enemy that served to further confuse Sh'ten's mind. Ryo, who had already nearly laid down his life on several occasions to save his comrades. That was something none of Arago's warriors would ever dream of doing for one another. Survival of the fittest was their credo--and those not fit deserved to die, to be replaced by someone else who could perhaps serve Lord Arago better.

A part of him longed for the sort of support the Troopers gave to each other, both mind and spirit, and was getting thoroughly tired of the constant

bickering and fighting between the servants of the demon. Battles that kept them divided one against another, battles that Sh'ten had concluded Arago actually encouraged. Sometimes Sh'ten wondered if he had come to hate the Samurai Troopers more for their camaraderie than for their opposition to his Master.

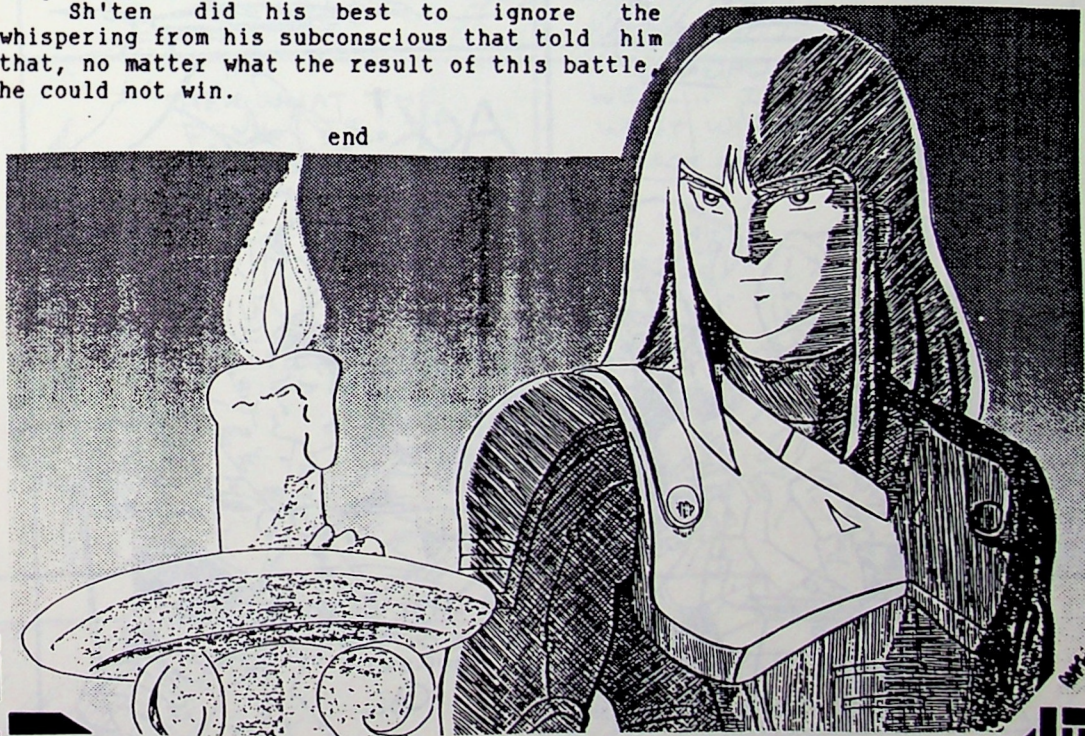
For a second, he wondered what it would be like to be a Trooper and have such friends... then realized he was responding to that thought with an insatiable longing, a hunger that he found difficult to deny. *Weakness!* another part of his mind insisted, and firmly thrust that longing back into his subconscious, where it had sprung from. *Not that they'd have me anyway...* another thought contributed wistfully before it, too, was suppressed. But it was thoughts like these which had led Sh'ten to begin questioning Arago in the first place, to the secret wondering whether he should be serving the demon at all. And could lead to fatal hesitation...

Pain, sudden and lancing, struck through his head, sending Sh'ten to his hands and knees. His forehead itched dreadfully; it was all Sh'ten could do to keep from rubbing it. In his mind, Sh'ten was aware of the images of two of the Samurai Troopers, those of Ryo and Toma--and instinctively knew they had both escaped the traps Arago had set for them; were even now returning to Earth to continue their battle against his lord. Knew they were somehow responsible for the splitting headache that even now was fading rapidly. Shakily, he climbed back to his feet. "Damned Samurai Troopers!" he cursed once more, summoning his armor. "This time I shall succeed!" Perhaps by eliminating the Troopers he could erase his own doubts. Determined, without waiting for Arago's orders, Sh'ten transported himself back to Earth to face his equally determined opponents.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Sh'ten heard the dark rumble of Lord Arago's spectral voice: "Do not fail me again, Sh'ten!"

Sh'ten did his best to ignore the whispering from his subconscious that told him that, no matter what the result of this battle, he could not win.

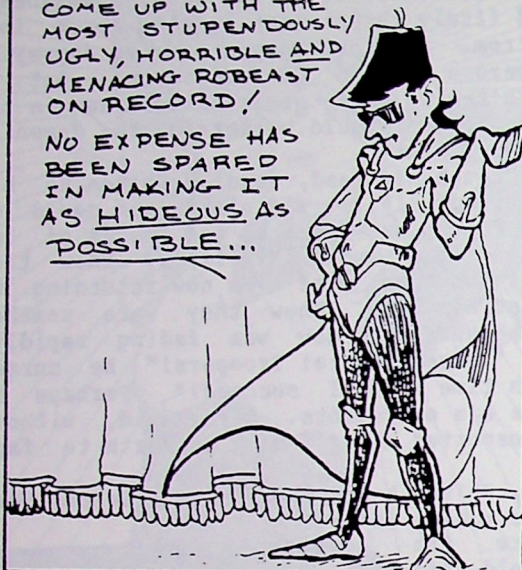
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Voltron County: Episode Four

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE WONDERING WHY I CALLED YOU ALL HERE... I WANT YOU TO KNOW I'VE BEEN POUNDING THE OL' GREY MATTER, AND I'VE COME UP WITH THE MOST STUPENDOUSLY UGLY, HORRIBLE AND MENACING ROBEAST ON RECORD!

NO EXPENSE HAS BEEN SPARED IN MAKING IT AS HIDEOUS AS POSSIBLE...



TA - DAH!



IT'S LOATHSOME!

OH, GROSS!

DISGUSTING!

How
Boy!



ACK!

MUGWART OL' BOY
YOU'VE OUTDONE
YOURSELF

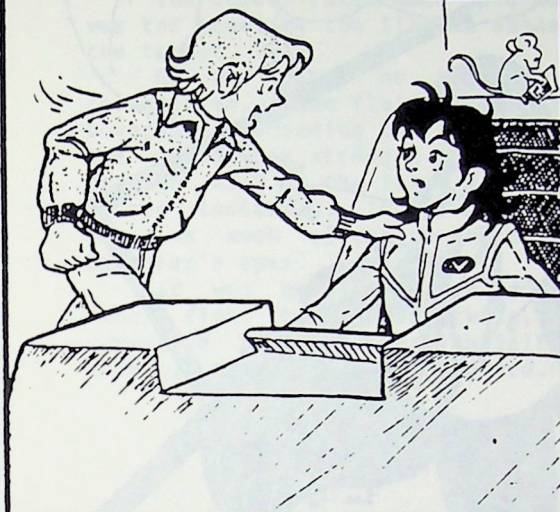
Co..



"Voltron County" Episode Five

CAPTAIN KEITH! LOTOR'S
NEW ROBEAST IS ATTACKING
THE CASTLE!!

WHAT?



IS IT SHOOTING UP THE PLACE?
NO...
BURNING THE VILLAGE?
NO...
THREATENING THE PEOPLE?
NO...



THEN WHAT THE
DEVIL IS IT
DOING?



WELL... IT'S USING THE
WEST WING OF THE
PALACE AS A SCRATCHING POST...





***Be Careful of
Your Little Boy***

by Barb Tennison

Maraich woke up, feeling wrongness in his marrow. The target stood across the room, unharmed. He'd failed again with this Bancoran and now he'd lost the game.

It was an odd feeling, losing. Not something Maraich was used to.

Gleaming eyes watched him from the pale face with its peaked frame of dark hair. There was something about this target that made killing easy to imagine: unlike Larkin, this man risked himself to the dangers Maraich faced. And had won.

The concentrated gaze held Maraich's attention, somehow familiar. It was too knowing, too like an assassin sizing up a target. Now Maraich was the target...

He was given no time to think about it, beyond that flash of recognition. The fluid, deadly figure loomed over him, the hypnotic eyes hovering, descending to close off all escape. Maraich could not move under the implacable strength that pinned his body, and only felt terror course through him at the first kiss. He fought not to feel it, and lost that battle instantly. It was not the strength that pinned his body that held him, as much as the throbbing presence and the intent he had seen in Bancoran's eyes.

It was completely at odds with his life in Larkin's service. He should fight it. He had, twice, and had been bested. Now Bancoran's eyes commanded him, and Maraich felt the kiss that sealed them together lift from his mouth and move downward.



Maraich kissed Bancoran good-bye and turned to leave with the escorting guards. It was not a parting, any more than this morning's kiss was a re-enactment of the ecstasies of the night before. This was only a form of action, convenient until their newly-forged affinities could bring them together again.

The guards took Maraich away to some place and presently Larkin appeared to retrieve his young assassin, his spiller-of-blood who had failed. No, thought Maraich, Bancoran is not my failure. I am his success. He had enough caution not to show his triumph during their silent return to the place that had been home.

Larkin took him into the study--scene of many interviews, including one that had featured a glassful of wine--for the tedious, inevitable talk. Maraich had no wish to start it and merely took a chair at Larkin's gesture. He still had on the demure, gatecrasher costume. Larkin would dislike that.

The Count gazed coldly and with some puzzlement at Maraich. He was probably very angry, too angry for calculated gestures. "It should have worked," he said finally.

"Yes."

"That's twice in a row. Maraich, are you quite well?"

Nothing could have stopped Maraich's smile then: not demons, not the devil himself, not even a word from Bancoran. "Yes."

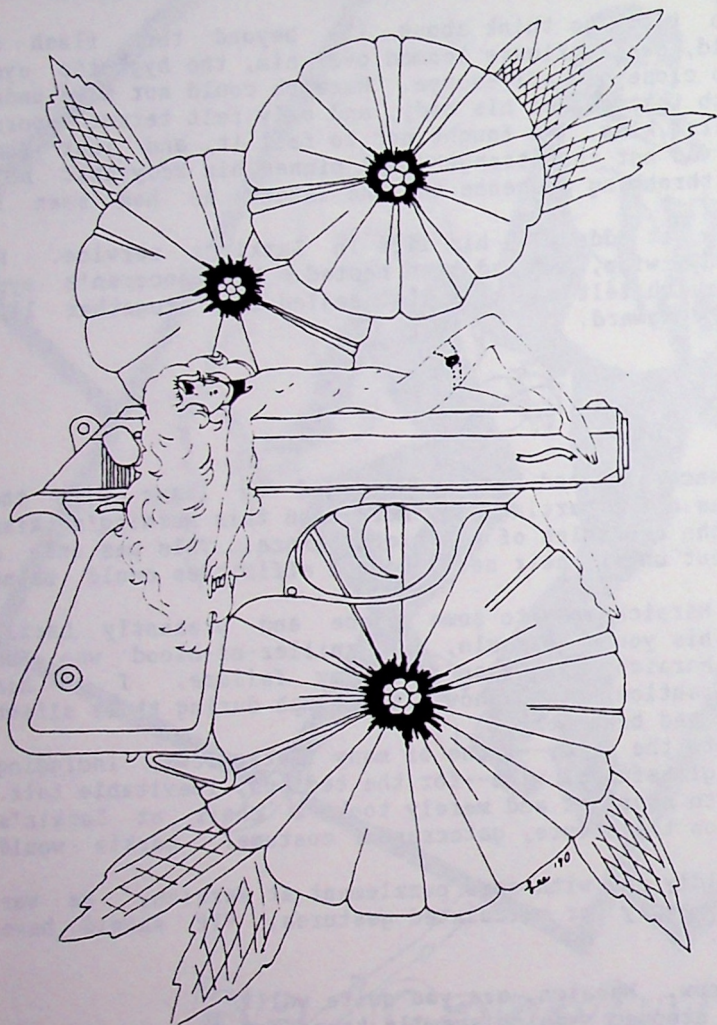
Hard eyes narrowed. "I must ask if you are giving this matter the attention it deserves."

"Oh, yes," Maraich said with dreamy pleasure. Bancoran... At Larkin's



frown, he recalled that the Count would never tolerate being treated as inconsequential, and there was no reason to endure his stern temper. Everything he said here was totally meaningless now. Maraich pulled himself to the present and added, "Both attempts on the target were carefully planned. The first nearly succeeded. The second, he spotted before I could carry it through. He is... the better man. I cannot kill him."

"I've never heard you admit defeat, Maraich." Larkin's voice was cold now, contemptuous and dangerous. It meant nothing. Maraich curled himself into the chair, full of dizzy languor and recent memories. His body felt new and unfamiliar.



"Am I to understand that you will not continue with this assignment?"

"I can't kill him." And he didn't kill me. He made me alive.

"Can't, or won't, Maraich?"

Maraich, untouched by the anger and emotion, looked through a haze of red curls and eyelashes at his erstwhile employer, rescuer, lover, lord and master. "I can't kill him. I won't try."

A hard-eyed scowl met him. "You're acting like a schoolgirl. It won't do. Just because he's evaded you twice, you cannot give up! Have you lost your nerve?"

Maraich shook his head, thinking of what he had and hadn't lost.

Larkin stopped berating him and simply looked him over, speculatively. "You were held overnight. What were the nature of your... negotiations?" For the first time, the Count might have looked

uneasy, though Maraich wasn't sure he'd have recognized the expression on Larkin's face.

"I don't believe I can explain it," said Maraich, from his other

world. He could not begin to put the night's experience into words, and would not try for the mundane-spirited Larkin.

"You say Bancoran saw your second attack in time to stop you. Were you careless or does he have eyes in the back of his head?"

"He has eyes..." sighed Maraich.

"I assume you were captured then."

"Yes. I'd been wounded the night of your party. While I was fighting, it re-opened and I went down." He realized, with a shock, that this was a poor line of argument.

"Yes?"

Maraich shrugged in perfect comfort. "When I woke, I was in Bancoran's custody. Where I remained."

"For the night?"

"Yes."

"I see. You don't seem upset by it."

The world has changed, you are nothing. I am Bancoran's as I was never yours. "It was an interesting night."

"Maraich. I would prefer to think that I have not lost your loyalty."

That was a threat. Just temporarily, during the formalities that separated him from Bancoran in physical space, it would be wise to heed it. "You have given me everything I have," said Maraich. Except true life. Except freedom. "I sorrow that I cannot obey your order in this. He is beyond me." Bancoran was with Maraich this instant, heart and soul and blood.

"What has he done to you!"

You gave me wine. He gave me... life. "Too much to forget quickly. Do you want the particulars?"

Larkin's tastes and distastes were entirely predictable. "No!" Maraich realized, with relief, that he would have the same distaste for any physical intimacy. All the better. It would have been difficult to remember passion where it had been so wholly superseded.

"Good," said Maraich after another brief silence, coldly. "I don't want to talk about it, if you please. I cannot take Bancoran. Will there be anything else?"

"No. Stay in the house for the present. As a matter of security."

"Yes, sir," said Maraich, through his eyelashes. He did not think Larkin had ever known how often he laughed at him; he hoped the Count did not know it now.

"Go."

Maraich uncurled from the chair and departed with deliberate haste, wanting only to dream of the night past without interruptions: the kiss that had tasted of blood, the kiss that drew it; the kiss that gave it back, tasting of new life and strength. Bancoran's life, now Maraich's, the life of blood and the immortal hunter. Maraich smiled at the closed study door. He was too honorable to take Larkin's blood so soon.

He was not hungry yet.

end

Ashibe Yoho's "Crystal Dragon"

a portfolio by Heather Bruton

In 1982 the first collection of Crystal Dragon appeared. Since then, there have been twelve volumes and the story is not yet completed. The art and plot is by Ashibe Yoho of Deimos No Hanayome fame. Crystal Dragon is a bit of an oddity in mangadom. In it, Ashibe has tried to combine the history and magic of the British Isles, during the years of the Roman occupation. She has made a real attempt to get accuracy in dress and culture while mixing in the living mythology of the land. Elves, fairies, unicorns, and heroes of myth populate the saga. Occasionally she does fall down with the mixing of mythologies and she's not quite accurate in places, but she manages to put across a wonderful sense of the cultures and people.

Our hero is a young woman, Arianrhod. She bears a secret destiny which will bring her from her girlhood to consort with the movers and shakers of her world. Her travels involve her with many people and factions, as well as many encounters with the world of Faerie. In particular, her destiny seems to be intertwined with that of the elf, Legion.

Ireland is struggling against a great warlord, Ballor, who has made a pact with the Unseelie court and is busily doing all manner of evil things. It seems to be Arianrhod's destiny to oppose him.

While this is the main plotline, it is by no means the only one. The personal lives and loves of many people weave in and out, adding poignant and personal perspectives to the grand design. So, Crystal Dragon is about not only Arianrhod's quest, but the way the war touches the lives of people both great and small.

Crystal Dragon is not a manga you can just look at and follow. It is complicated, full of intrigues and subplots. I still find myself discovering bits of information and fitting them into the whole picture. I have hopes of someday being able to enjoy more than just the incredible art.

BUT! You can enjoy this wonderful manga just for its artwork. It is delicate yet powerful. Ashibe has a masterful control of her craft. Details are the part that delight me the most.

Celtic knotwork provides little touches in many panels, from pillars to jewelry. The clothing is varied and skillfully embroidered. This is not a manga where the people spend their entire time in one suit of clothes. Hell, Ballor himself must be a bloody clotheshorse with the amount of times he changes his clothes! Into the story art is fitted little minutia of life in this time period. People don't just stand around, they hunt seals, skin deer, care for animals, tend the fields and go about their lives. I adore when the world of Faerie intrudes upon the mortal world. Suddenly, the waves hide mermaids, fairies flit among pine trees, unicorns drink at quiet pools: the very air glitters.

It is a manga full of drama and humor, one that will stand up to a second, third, fourth look. Each time there is some new detail to discover, some little clue to add to your knowledge of what is happening. The following portfolio is inspired by this wonderful work. I've drawn most of the major characters, but only a fraction of the important ones. To really do it justice, I'd need to do a fifty page one! It's any easy manga to be inspired by, so many pretty people, interesting costumes and themes. It's a fascinating place to visit. I hope you'll enjoy this little peek.

Pg. 136: Arianrhod, backed by images of Effidar, a Roman nobleman, and the enigmatic Griffys.

Pg. 137: Legion, elven warrior and Arianrhod's ally

Pg. 138: Miagh, the Ard Righ, ie. the High King at Tara. Ballor's sworn enemy.

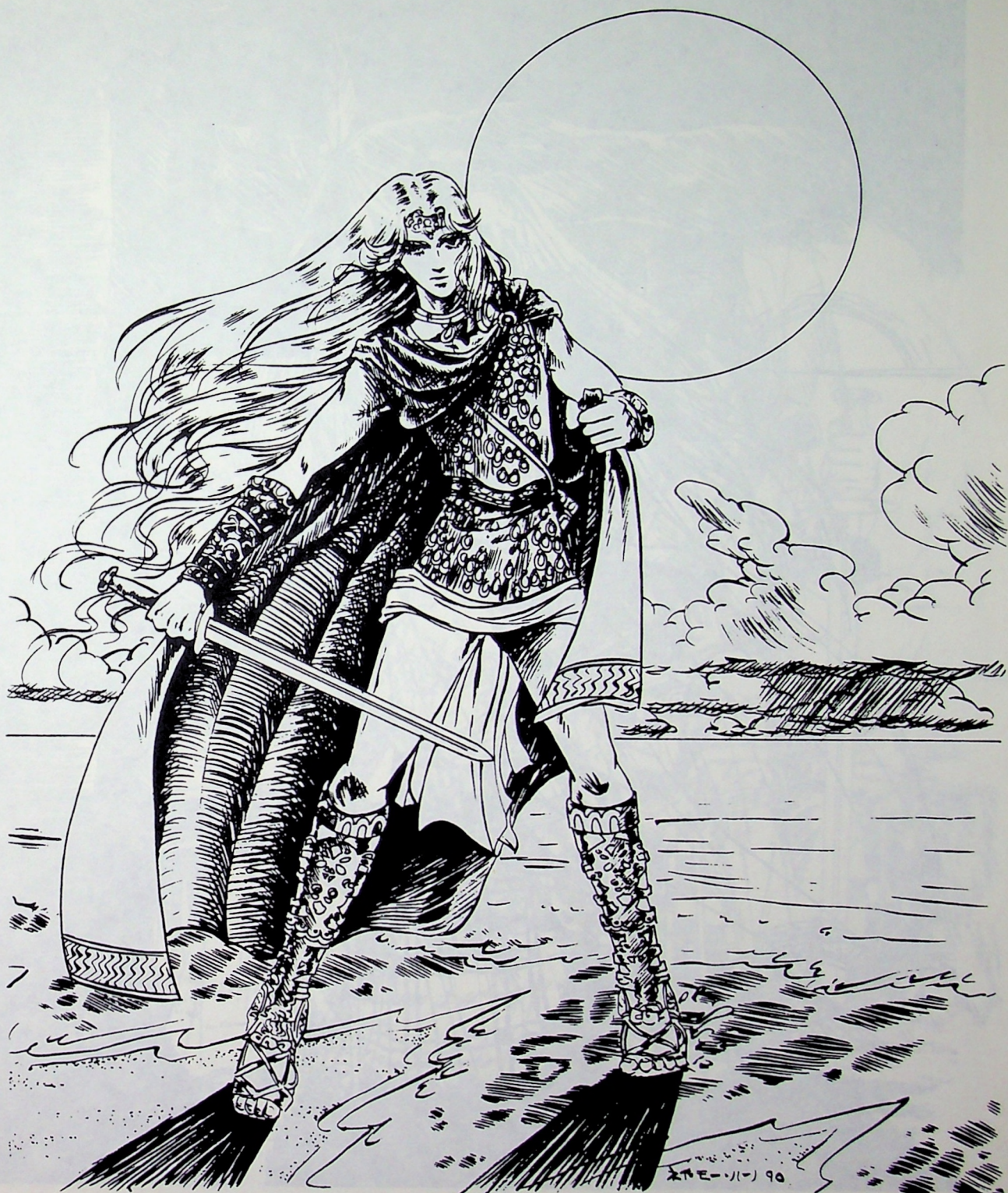
Pg. 139: Lord Ballor of the Evil Eye. The boy's name was Rathmore when he was alive. After his death, he serves as a vessel in which to imprison the captured soul of the Ard Righ.

Pg. 140: Shorir Narsson, escaped slave of Roman, and Arianrhod's best friend, Henrudda, victim of Ballor's curse.

Pg. 141: Gillys, warrior, wanderer and hurt/comfort figure extraordinaire.

Pg. 142: Marne, a wandering bard. The harp is infused with the magic of the unicorn's mate.









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Hunter/Prey

by Karen Klinck



Toshi Utsumi sat in his office, his sleeves rolled up, his tie loose, his collar opened, a cigarette in his mouth and a scowl on his face. Like most good detectives, he absolutely hated reports. He had not, he moaned with the others, joined the force to produce paper. He had joined to help people, to solve crimes, and to prevent others from occurring. Toshi fumbled for his Tums and swallowed two, then went back to his one-fingered typing. Next to him, Mitsuko Asatani was fighting with one of her own. Toshi mumbled under his breath as he typed, cursing; he had to white-out a mistake, and as soon as he touched the keys again he made the same one. Toshi moaned and dropped his head into his hands.

"I can't take this!" he wailed.

"It's hot in here," Mitsuko moaned. "I want to get out..."

"Home. Or just interviewing people. Or something!" Toshi railed. "I hate reports!"

Captain Sousa discreetly stayed out of the big office during these times. His people were under enough strain without him showing up. He waited in his office instead, fielding phone calls and hoping that nothing would break. He was lucky. Toshi had just signed his name to the last report and brought the stack in to add to the pile on Sousa's desk when the phone rang again. Toshi was at the door when Sousa's urgent call stopped him.

"Utsumi!" Then, to the phone, "Go on. Who? Any reason why? Where?"

A hostage? More than one? Who? We'll get there right away." Sousa turned his eyes back to his stationary subordinate as he hung up the phone. "Daisuke Hiramatsu escaped from prison this morning. He didn't get far, but he's holed up in a farmhouse and he's holding the family that lives there hostage. The provincial police have the place surrounded."

"Daisuke Hiramatsu. He's the one who threatened to kill me when he got out. Has he demanded my head on a platter yet?"

"They want us out there. He's been a thoroughly intractable prisoner, and he was heading for Tokyo when they cut him off."

"I'll get my coat."

Sousa had a black-and-white outside the building with its motor running. He and Toshi ran out to it, hopped in the back, and it took off, siren screaming. Hitomi Kisugi, standing in the doorway of the Catseye Coffee Shop, watched them go. She stood there until she could no longer see the car, then went back inside. The shop was busy.

Toshi had time to think on the ride into the country. He was very grim as the car drew to a halt behind a fleet of similar vehicles. He had a very strong wish that he could have had a chance to talk to Hitomi before he came here. Then he shrugged aside regrets and stepped to the forward lines with Sousa. His fellow police were crouched behind cars, trees and buildings, tensely watching the farmhouse.

A shotgun blasted at the watching police. They were well under cover, so the pellets passed by harmlessly.

"All right, cops! I've got six people in here, and I'll kill 'em slowly and messily unless you do what I say. I want a fast car, and a way clear from here--and I want the cop that put me in prison. You drag him here, cops, or--"

"Oh, stuff it, Hiramatsu!" Toshi yelled back. "I'm here already. I knew you'd get around to me sooner or later. What's the matter? Got to have others do your work for you? I knew you--how do you think I caught you in the first place?" He thought briefly of Hitomi, wistfully. "Let them go, and I'll come in."

"Yeah? I don't believe you!"

Toshi stripped off his jacket and shoulder holster, then stepped into the open before anyone else realized what he was doing.

"I'm coming in," he called softly, and began to walk forward.

To everyone's surprise, he was not cut down. The door opened to his touch, and he walked into a siege scene. The woman held her children close, and her husband hovered between them and their captor, who stared at Toshi in opened-mouthed wonder.

"All right, I'm here. Let them go," Toshi said quietly.

"Wha--"

"You wanted me. I'm here. You don't need them. Let them go."

"Suppose I just shoot them before I shoot you?"

"What good would it do?" Toshi asked wearily. "All you'd do is make people disgusted with you. Let them go."

"Huh! You! Find me some rope! Lots of rope!"

Faced with a direct command, the farmer blinked in confusion. The most that had been said to him and his so far was "shut up!"

"Now! Or I'll shoot them!"

The shotgun jerked at the woman and her children. The farmer gulped and glanced at Toshi, then scurried out. A few minutes later he returned with a coil of rope.

"Good. Now, tie his hands. If you don't tie him tight, I'll fire!"

Frightened by the savage tone, the farmer advanced on Toshi. The officer offered no resistance as his arms were lashed brutally behind him. The farmer was a strong man; in his profession he had to be. Toshi grunted as the farmer wound rope around his chest.

"All right. Now, take those sniveling brats and get out. Tell those cops I want a fast car."

"Uh--yes, sir. Yes, sir."

After the family had left, with many backward looks, the con turned to Toshi. The shotgun poked under Toshi's chin.

"Did you hear that, cop? They called me 'sir'."

"Nah. They called that gun 'sir'. You're still nothing, Hiramatsu. You're only important for what you hold, or who you're with." The gun ground into Toshi's jugular, pushing him back against the wall. "Go ahead," he invited coldly, his voice slightly strangled by the gun's position. "Do you know what my fellow police would do to you if you killed me now and didn't have a hostage to threaten them with? You're only as important as I am, Hiramatsu."

Hiramatsu knocked Toshi spinning with a fist on his ear. Helpless, Toshi sprawled on the kitchen floor. Hiramatsu kicked him viciously. Then Hiramatsu dropped a slip-noose around Toshi's neck, chuckling.

"You're right about your hostage value, cop. Real right. I've got to get that car. Come to the door."

After a mighty shove, Toshi stumbled out into the sunshine. The con would have been just as happy to let Toshi's peers shoot him, but everyone held their fire; they knew one of their own was in a bad situation.

"Captain," Toshi called in response to the hissed prompting behind the door, "Hiramatsu says he wants that car now. He's going to take me with him, I think--"

At that point, Hiramatsu jerked on the rope around Toshi's neck, pulling him to the ground. Toshi coughed. The rope's steady pressure pulled him scrambling back inside, where



Hiramatsu sat him up against a wall.

"You crawl real good, cop. Real good. Keep it up and you'll live longer. I like it."

Toshi looked at the grinning, unshaven face above him, and shrugged. He thought again of Hitomi, picturing her in a wedding gown, and again shrugged. They heard the sounds of a vehicle being driven close; Hiramatsu let the rope play out as he went to the window to look, a gun ready to fire if it was a trick. The driver scrambled out and trotted back to the police lines. The car waited, its motor running.

"A beautiful car, beautiful! We'll go far. I know someplace where I can attend to you at my leisure. I'm gonna kill you, cop, for what you did. And I'm going to take a long time to do it!"

"Yeah. All right! And after that, what will you do? You won't be just a man who specializes in smash-and-grabs, you'll be a cop-killer, a murderer, and someone who no one will shelter, everyone will hate--despise!--and who the police will track down unceasingly until they catch you like an animal in a trap! Then they'll treat you like an animal..."

Hiramatsu leaped forward and viciously backhanded Toshi.

"Shut up! Shut up, do you hear me? You deserve to die, you stinkin' cop! It was you that got me locked up in that stinking, living hell of a prison! It's your fault! Yours! Now get up!"

Toshi pulled himself up against the wall, his eyes warily fixed on the raving escapee. His suspicions were well-founded: the man took a brutal hold on the tight noose and forced Toshi ahead of him out the opened door into the bright sunlight. Sousa looked grimly at the tableau: Toshi, wincing at the rope's pull, had blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. His shirt was creased where the rope wound tightly against him. The weapon-laden, striped-prisoner-pajama-clad con pulled him along, the heavy automatic against Toshi's skull. The officer staggered as he reached the car, and the gun jabbed warningly. Hiramatsu got in, pulled Toshi after him. The con slammed the car door and took off. Sousa wiped his face.

"Is that tracking device working?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," a uniformed man replied.

"Good. He had to go in, I know, but..."

"To the car!" a provincial police commander ordered. "We can't let that maniac escape! If he has enough time, that officer is dead!"

Everyone scrambled for their cars, and no one realized, at the time, that a news crew was filming the whole incident.



"News flash!" the TV blared. Hitomi glared at it. Ai was plastered before it, waiting for her favourite show. She looked put out. If it was a long development, the station would cut the opening of the show, depriving her of one of her favourite shots of the characters.

"Just in from Ashikaga! Escaped convict Daisuke Hiramatsu holed up early this afternoon in a farmhouse on the banks of the river Tone, holding the farmer and his family hostage. The police surrounded the house. Hiramatsu threatened to kill the entire family unless his demands were met. We have here footage of the confrontation."

The following scenes, a minute in length, were rather dull: an official picture of Daisuke Hiramatsu, an official voice hailing an innocuous shanty,

and yelled refusal to surrender, and a pop or two that was actually a weapon firing, that sent uniformed police scurrying for cover.

"Hiramatsu wanted his freedom, a car, and the detective who had sent him to prisoner. In a surprise move, that man went in to him, to save people he did not know. Officer Toshio Utsumi, a detective-sergeant with the Tokyo Metro police, is now a hostage. He courageously took the place of six people, delivering himself into the hands of a man who wanted revenge."

Again a minute of footage followed, this showing Toshi's entrance into the farmhouse, and the farm family leaving and running to safety.

"Officer Utsumi has been taken to an unknown destination by Daisuke Hiramatsu tonight, as police supplied a car to avoid Utsumi's death in that farmyard. Police are continuing their efforts to capture the criminal, who must be regarded as extremely dangerous. He was carrying a rifle, a shotgun, and two automatic pistols when last seen. If you should see this man, do not approach. Contact your local police and stay out of his way. Hiramatsu is five foot seven, one hundred and forty-five pounds. His age is listed as twenty-seven. He was last seen wearing prison uniform... We now return you to our regularly scheduled programming."

Throughout the descriptions of Toshi and Hiramatsu, the graphic scenes from the escape to the car had been shown. Hitomi dropped her platter with a scream, which brought in Rui. She stared at her horror-stricken sisters, then at the screen where Hiramatsu's prison mug shots were being prominently displayed, with the local police number below.

"What's wrong?" Rui demanded.

"That bastard's got Toshi hostage!" Ai announced.

"Watch your language!" Rui warned automatically. "Hostage? What's going on?"

"He's--that's Daisuke Hiramatsu. He's the one who threatened Toshi when he was sentenced. He said he'd kill Toshi--slowly--someday, for locking him up. Toshi traded himself to spare a farm family: a man, his wife, and their four children, one of whom looked to be about two... And they don't know where he is now. He got away from them! They gave him the car he demanded, and he pulled Toshi in and took off!"

"Hitomi!" Rui said, taking her in her arms and feeling her tremble. "Take heart. The police are very efficient--they'll find him again. I can't believe they'd give him a car without putting a tracer on it. It'll just be a matter of time. Now, you sit down and I'll make you some tea. We'll listen for more news."

Hitomi sat facing not the TV screen, now blaring away with a high-adventure program, but the big picture window facing police headquarters. Rui shook her head and went out. Ai forsook the TV to stand next to Hitomi.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" she asked.

"Nothing. We can't do anything until someone discovers where that car went."

"Do you think the police planted a tracer on it?" Ai asked.

"Oh, I hope so! But they still have to find him again."

"They're not stupid, Hitomi," Rui said, returning. "We always have to plan to stay ahead of them. This convict doesn't appear to be too bright. They'll find him."

She put the tray on the table, and picked up a cup and the teapot.





Across the street there was a great deal of consternation.

"Didn't anyone catch that camera crew?" Sousa howled. "And why didn't the news editor clear it with us first?"

"At least they made the appeal to call us if he's seen," the Commissioner replied sourly. "I'm going to roast someone's ears for this!"

"Hitomi," Sousa said, his face gray.

"What?"

"His girlfriend--she and her sisters run the Catseye Coffee Shop across the street. If she didn't see that broadcast, someone's sure to tell her about it!"

"Call her," the Commissioner said gruffly. "I'll speak with her."

"Yes, sir." Sousa picked up the phone. "Officer Asatani, check our records and see if you can't find Hitomi Kisugi's phone number. I'll hold."

A moment of silence passed, then he grunted and scribbled something on a pad.

"No, there was a TV news broadcast in full, gory technicolor. She's bound to see it, or someone else will and tell her. --Yes. Thank you. If she needs assistance I'll keep you in mind."

Setting the phone down, he turned back to the Commissioner. "Officer Mitsuko Asatani has offered to stay with Miss Kisugi if she needs help--or a guard."

The Commissioner nodded. "All right. If it's necessary, we'll send her. Can you get Miss Kisugi on the line?"

"Yes, sir."

The phone at the residence rang, and Rui answered it. "Yes? Yes, just a minute." She lowered the phone, looking with concern at her sister.

"Hitomi, the police commissioner wants to speak to you."

Hitomi set aside her teacup, and slowly walked forward to take the phone. Her face was pale as she put it to her ear. Rui squeeze her free hand encouragingly.

"Yes?"

"Miss Kisugi, my name is Hiroshi Motomiya. I'm Commissioner of Police for the Metro Tokyo area. I assume you've seen the broadcast this evening?"

"Y-yes, I did," Hitomi said, gripping the phone tightly. She did not have to ask which broadcast. "Is--is there any news?"

"Nothing yet, Miss Kisugi. We'll let you know as soon as we hear anything. If you would like to come here and watch, we'll be glad to show you everything we're doing. Why don't you get a good night's sleep tonight--take yourself a sleeping pill--and come over to our communications department in the morning? Officer Mitsuko Asatani has offered to be your guide--you can watch, and she'll explain anything you need to ask. We'll catch that man and rescue Officer Utsumi."

"I--yes, thank you. I will. Thank you." She paused. "Yes. Good-bye." Hitomi slowly lowered the phone to the cradle.

Rui came over to touch her arm. "What was it?"

"There's no news. Commissioner Motomiya called to offer his sympathy. He said I can come over tomorrow and watch the hunt. He--he told me to take a sleeping pill tonight..."

"That's sensible," Rui agreed, taking her arm. "Come with me. You need a hot bath, a cup of cocoa, and a sleeping pill. You'll feel better tomorrow, when some of the shock has worn off, and you can plan... Ai, turn that thing off and do your homework!"

"Yes. That sounds good." Hitomi allowed herself to be led off. Rui stayed with her every step of the way, and sat by her side as she slept.

In the morning Hitomi hurried over to the police headquarters, to discover Mitsuko waiting for her. The two buried their animosity for the duration and went up to the communications office. Hitomi sat tensely in a chair, looking at a map of Japan. Most of it was covered in red; as she watched, a young man pinned more red cellophane over an area.

"That's places he absolutely can't be," Mitsuko explained softly. "There's an awful lot of area where he still could be, but they're triangulating on the homing device now, and everyone's pretty sure he can't be in Tokyo. That's a relief, in a way--I can imagine a door-to-door search and the delays it would take..."

Hitomi nodded. "I always knew it was a dangerous job," she murmured almost inaudibly. "But just sitting here, waiting--oh, I hope he's all right!"

Mitsuko briefly squeezed her hand before turning to answer a phone.



Hiramatsu stopped the car on a rutted dirt road, got out, stretched, then yanked Toshi out with the noose. The officer looked decidedly worse for wear, and his stomach rumbled emptily. He stared at his captor grimly.

"Now what?" he asked quietly.

"Now we're gonna go climbin'," Hiramatsu grinned. "Up that path."

"What path?" Toshi asked, looking around in bewilderment.

"Here."

The tug on the rope led Toshi up an overgrown path. Hiramatsu pulled steadily; Toshi, having no arms to help his balance or shield his face, alternately fell as his feet tangled in the long grass or was slapped by overhanging branches. The fading light threw false shadows, and he often stepped in little holes he otherwise would have avoided. Hiramatsu chuckled as he watched his victim struggle through the underbrush. They reached a sagging, abandoned woodcutter's hut, and Hiramatsu laughed aloud.

"No one's been here since I took my daughter here three years ago! No one knows about this place but me!"

Toshi had a scratch across his left cheek, and his shirt was thoroughly stained with dirt and grass. He gazed thoughtfully at Hiramatsu.

"I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Her mother took her two years ago when she left me. She wanted-- everything!--then left me when I couldn't get it fast enough to suit her. Then all the trouble began. Then she called me a common thief and refused to let me see my little girl! All through the trial she hung up on me-- refused to let me talk to Yuki; returned my letters to her... Then she was hit by her new boyfriend, and she died. Her mother has my Yuki, and she never liked me. After I finish with you, I'm going to get Yuki, and we'll go to another country if we have to--America--and live like normal people. Just her and me: father and daughter."

"Shave first," Toshi said mildly, "or you'll scare her to death. You did a good job on that farm couple's kids."

Hiramatsu laughed. "I guess I did."

"So you don't care what happens to other kids," Toshi growled. "It's a good thing you can't contaminate your own!"

Hiramatsu snarled and swung a huge fist, knocking Toshi against one of the porch struts. Pain exploded in the officer's skull, and he blacked out, his body falling to the ground. The enraged con kicked the unmoving form until he ran out of strength, then stormed into the building. He set bits of metal to heat in an open firepit and rigged up a strange-looking set of ropes. While he worked he avoided a portion of floor he knew was rotten; it had been rotten the last time he had been in there. Then, as he passed a mirror, he looked up and froze in shock. For the first time he saw sense in Toshi's words. A sudden sense of guilt overwhelmed him. He went into the dark outside, lifted Toshi in his arms, and came back inside to lay him on a rotting futon. He tied Toshi's ankles together, then tied the noose rope to a roof pole. He sat by the fire to think, feeling lower and lower about the farm family. How could he expect people to want him united with his family when he treated another family so badly? Wanting a distraction, he turned on the small portable radio he had lifted from the farmhouse. Mood music filled the room.

Close to dawn Hiramatsu heard Toshi regaining consciousness, but ignored him for the time being. He had to get his priorities straight, and it was not easy trying to change two years of thinking all at once. He knew his ex-wife and mother-in-law had been telling his daughter exaggerated stories, and now had to miserably admit those stories had some basis in fact. He did have a bad temper, and he was impulsive. Toshi moaned softly, and Hiramatsu winced. He got up and stood over the panting officer.

"Cop," he said abruptly, "tell me honestly--what do you think the chances are of me taking my daughter and running to another country?"

"How would you get out?" Toshi asked, "And how would you get in? You can't get a valid visa anywhere. If you got a phony one--which takes money!--you'd always be on the run. And you'd have to explain to your

daughter why, too." Toshi grimaced again, pain in his ribs and legs, and continued. "You'd always worry--where was she, had someone found out? She'd never be able to make any friends--what if someone recognized you? How would you register her in school? What kind of life would she lead, running from village to town? Hiramatsu, if you really love your daughter, think of her well-being!"

Toshi flinched backward as the con rounded savagely on him. The escapee sighed dolefully as his prey quivered with pain. He squatted down and gagged the officer, not unduly tight, with a large chunk of wood and a long strip of cloth. Toshi waited to be hurt as the ends of the cloth were tied behind his head. But all Hiramatsu did was start to pace. Toshi decided Hiramatsu had no wish to hear more, and relaxed fractionally.

"It's not fair," Hiramatsu muttered finally, still pacing. He turned to stare at his prisoner. "It's still your fault."

Toshi's eyes said plainly, it was my job.

Hiramatsu started pacing again. "I love my daughter, and I want to see her! Is there anything so terrible about that? Oh, God, what should I do? And what should I do about you? Nothing's clear anymore..."

Toshi sympathized with the tormented man. He knew, from some of his own doubts about police work, that a right choice was not easy to find, and sometimes did not stay "right". He wondered what he might have done in a similar situation--or, perhaps, what might happen if he had a child and some criminal menaced it and Hitomi. Would he be able to maintain a properly clinical attitude? He rather doubted it and, to keep his mind off his troubles, began attempting to analyze his feelings.

"And now the eight o'clock news."

That was the radio. Toshi and Hiramatsu both paid attention. They knew Hiramatsu's escape would be newsworthy.

"Topping the news this hour is the continuing saga of the vicious escapee, Daisuke Hiramatsu, whose brutal kidnapping of the selfless policeman who offered himself for a rural family he did not even know has dominated the news so far today. Today Hiramatsu's nine-year-old daughter, Yuki, was hit by a car as she ran from her school's playground. No charges have been placed against the driver. Witnesses said her classmates had been taunting her about her father. School aides stationed on the playground were not quick enough to prevent the tragedy. School officials have begun an investigation. The child lies unconscious in the hospital, her condition listed as serious.



"We are told that Yuki Hiramatsu has strenuously insisted that her father is a good man, and when teased by other children about the hostage farm family and the brutal exit Hiramatsu made with Officer Utsumi, sought physical flight from words she could not bear to hear. We have learned that Yuki has not heard from her father in two years--not, we must add, because her father has ignored her. Instead, the young girl has been in first her

mother's, then her grandmother's care, and neither of them allowed her any contact with her father. The child's grandmother, Mrs. Tanaka, now admits that she has burned any letters Daisuke Hiramatsu sent his only child, and destroyed all existing pictures of him that she had had. Prison officials

have confirmed his concern for his daughter.

"If you can hear my words, Daisuke Hiramatsu, and feel sorry for your daughter--turn yourself in. The commissioner of police has promised that you may see Yuki. Her grandmother has promised to bar your path no longer. Your child calls for you when she is conscious. Please, Daisuke Hiramatsu, turn yourself in!"

The voice went on to speak of other matters, but neither man in the crumbling hut noticed. Hiramatsu, gray-faced, stared across the one-room building to Toshi. Toshi, equally horrified, stared back.

Toshi wanted to say comforting words to his captor. The gag prevented that, of course. He twisted to see him better, and bit down on his wooden gag as his body protested movement.

Toshi's freeze and grimace of pain decided Hiramatsu. "Cop," he said harshly, "can I really see my little girl?"

Toshi, sweating, nodded. He wanted to add, "I'll speak for you," and tried to let his eyes say it for him.

"All right. My kid can't die!"

Hiramatsu came across the room toward Toshi. As he did, though, he forgot the rotten flooring, and went through, pitching forward. His left leg went in, the splinters ripping the flesh and trapping his leg. Shock sent him reeling into unconsciousness. Hiramatsu's right leg was stretched behind him, his face lay against the floor. The convict had put out both hands to stop his fall; the only thing that had done was save his nose from getting broken.

Toshi gasped, then, grimacing with agony, wriggled toward him. As he neared the motionless convict, the noose tightened on his neck. Toshi took a deep breath and rolled to grab the nearest thing he could reach: the center back of Hiramatsu's shirt. The boards creaked, Hiramatsu slid further, and the noose tightened abruptly. Toshi gasped and screwed his eyes closed, tightening his numb fingers. Hiramatsu groaned, reviving. He realized his predicament in an instant, then, as the boards creaked again, felt the tug on his shirt. He turned his head cautiously. Toshi felt the movement and moaned against the gag. Hiramatsu stopped instantly.

"That you, cop?" he asked unbelievably.

Toshi grunted in assent.

"Are you crazy?"

Toshi thought about this, then grunted another, rather breathless, "uh-huh."

Hiramatsu felt something warm running down his left leg and realized he was bleeding badly.

"It's a lost cause, cop. Let go."

"Uh-uh," Toshi growled, his breath whistling through his nose.

"I'm bleeding--bad--and I can't reach it to stop it," Hiramatsu fumed.

"I can't get out of here. I can't reach that rope to hold on, either. Let go. Your friends'll find you. I was stupid to think I could get away with that--and think of what my daughter's schoolmates would've called her then! Daughter of a murderer, an animal... let go."

"Uh-uh."

"Dammit, cop, you'll kill yourself!"

A shout came from outside, startling both of them.

"Give up, Daisuke Hiramatsu! The place is surrounded, and you can't escape. It will go easier on you if you surrender now!"

Hiramatsu did not even hesitate. "Come on it!" he invited in a bellow. Then he thought about what he had said, and added in a more restrained

shout, "I'm giving myself up--but I can't come out. And--hurry. This idiot cop is strangling himself tryin' to keep me alive!"

Outside, the assembled police looked at each other dubiously.

"He's lying," one senior official said.

"And if he's not?"

"What did he mean by our man was 'strangling himself'?" the first wondered.

"Only one way to find out," the second replied calmly, and walked out into the open toward the sagging door. His men gasped in dismay, but he carefully mounted the stairs as they began to follow him. Walking slowly, but without hesitation, he crossed the porch and peered into the comparative darkness.

"Hey, here," Hiramatsu grunted. "Watch out for the floor. Hey, cop--you can let go now. There's other help here."

Toshi did not move or make a sound.

"Cop? Hey, Utsumi!"

The district commander looked the situation over. "Where's your gun?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hiramatsu said, bewildered. "I don't care... Maybe in my waistband. A couple are against the wall, I think. Do something about this cop, would you? He's strangling. Look, I know I did wrong. But all I want to do is see my little girl. I blamed Utsumi for a lot of things, but all he did was do his job too well to suit me. Okay, I can see that now... Help him, please?"

"All right. Men, shove two riot shields over to him. He can rest his weight on those and bypass the rotten area. Get a power saw out of the car so we can cut those boards, and radio for an ambulance.

"Hiramatsu, this house is built into the hillside. What are you falling into?"

"I don't know. I brought my daughter up here on a camping trip three years ago, and the floor was rotting then, but I noticed and was careful. I never thought there'd be something this deep in here--or what it might be... I've been slipping, until he grabbed my shirt. My foot hasn't touched bottom yet."

Shortly Hiramatsu was leaning on two long shields, carefully leaning back to take the strain off Toshi's hand.

"Don't move too much," Commander Asuka warned. "If you rip that artery, you'll be dead before we can cut you out."

"No loss to society," Hiramatsu shot back. Commander Asuka looked startled. "I think you're gonna have to cut the shirt off my back, Commander. He hasn't moved yet."

"I think I can reach Officer Utsumi," a young rural patrolman said.

"Don't take any chances," Commander Asuka said.

"Yes, sir."

Knife in hand, the young man angled across the floor toward Toshi. At the first warning creak of a board, he dropped to his belly and crawled on. Reaching Toshi, he severed the taut rope on his neck, then carefully pulled the noose off.

"Is he breathing?" Asuka demanded sharply.

"Yes, sir; just barely. He's unconscious. I'm afraid, Hiramatsu, that I will have to cut your shirt to get his hand loose."

"Go ahead, but be careful. We don't need all three of us going into whatever hold this is."

"Right." A few minutes of careful work left Hiramatsu with a gaping

hole in his shirt. The young officer slid the knife back to his fellows, then began inching back, towing Toshi with him. When it was safe, several others came over to help. They sliced Toshi's bonds, then carried him over to the futon.

The sound of the power saw roused Toshi. He blinked up at a group of concerned faces, then over at Hiramatsu. The escapee was calmly watching the officer with the saw. Toshi closed his eyes again, swallowing, and panted. He felt enervation wash through his body, leaving a vast weariness behind it as reaction set in.

"Just lie still, Officer Utsumi," Commander Asuka said. "We have an ambulance on the way."

"Yes, sir," Utsumi murmured. He forced his eyes open. "Don't be too hard on Hiramatsu, sir. He was driven. He wanted to see his daughter."

"Don't worry about it, Utsumi. I'll see to it personally. You just relax."

Hiramatsu had been suspended by a rope over a rafter as the saw cut through the boards around him. Two newsmen, one with a portable camera, had followed the ambulance attendants up the path, sensing a scoop. They now filmed the scene, excitement in their eyes.

"The police have captured the escaped convict Daisuke Hiramatsu," the reporter with the microphone said, while his companion kept the camera trained on him. "They captured him in an abandoned woodcutter's hut over sixty miles from the farmhouse in which he held first the farm's owners, then Officer Toshio Utsumi, captive. Officer Utsumi was rescued here, still alive; his condition is as yet unknown. The brutal, would-be killer--"

"Hold it, you!" Toshi snapped.

The reporter goggled at him.

"He is not a would-be killer. If he was, I would be dead right now. Get your facts straight." Toshi rolled to push himself to a sitting position; when he grimaced with pain several hands reached out to keep him still. He panted a moment. "Hiramatsu was a father denied visitation rights, denied even the pleasure of his child's letters, or her voice on the phone, until his anxiety drove him to try any means possible to see her."

"He promised retribution on you," the reporter said, elated at getting an interview (exclusive, at that) with the former hostage.

"Mister, if you push Officer Utsumi too far, your station will never get police cooperation again!" Commander Asuka growled. "Utsumi's been through a lot!"

The reporter swallowed, some of his zeal noticeably abating.

"If you're feeling up to it, Officer Utsumi, would you care to answer?" he gulped.

Toshi almost grinned. That had been a serious threat, and the reporter might have found himself pushing a broom in the station's basement when he got back.

Toshi said slowly, "Hiramatsu's wife took the child, and when he was arrested would not allow him to even speak to his daughter. From what he says, his letters were burned, unopened. We heard a news broadcast on that radio over there, that his daughter had been hit by a car and was asking for him. All he wanted was to see her. Commander Asuka's promised him he will. In a way, yes, he blamed me for being unable to see her. I can't hold that against him. His wife drove him to crime by her demands, then deserted him when he was captured. That wasn't my fault, and it was bad luck for both of us that I am a policeman and I arrested him. But--"

"That's enough. Officer Utsumi's tiring himself further. I'll have a

statement ready for the press later. In fact, if you care to wait--"

"Commander!" someone shouted, staring into the hole from which they had extracted Hiramatsu, his flashlight pointed down. "You should see this stuff!"

"What is it?"

"Looks like antiques, sir--and if that's not samurai armor, I'll eat it!"

"The era of Hidoyoshi, at the end of the Sengoku Jidai, was a turmoil," Hiramatsu contributed from a stretcher as medics worked over his leg. "It could be a family cache--hidden in a mine shaft, and the hut built over it; there were a lot of indications that this building has been maintained and rebuilt since about 1580. That's one of the things that attracted me to it in the first place. It isn't often you get to be so close to your history, no matter how humble it may be. Don't move anything until you've got an expert out here. That could be a treasure trove in more than just monetary value! It was about that time that Tokyo became the capital of Japan. Obviously, someone had planned to regain holdings and status at a later date. And to think I was bleeding on it."

Asuka blinked at the enthusiasm in Hiramatsu's voice. "I didn't know you were an historical scholar."

"Once upon a time I was," Hiramatsu sighed. "Once..."

Toshi was lifted to a stretcher, covered, and strapped down. The attending doctor had started an IV in Hiramatsu's arm, and now the two patients were carried down the mountain to the waiting ambulance. It went slowly down the bumpy, unpaved road until it reached pavement, then raced for Tokyo, siren screaming. Toshi found himself drowsing as the ambulance swayed occasionally. One uniformed patrolman rode with them and the attendant, keeping an eye on Hiramatsu. Hiramatsu, for his part, seemed to be utterly at peace with the world, and had a smile on his pale face. His eyes were closed. He had lost a lot of blood: the doctor was worried.

The ambulance screamed into the emergency doors of Tokyo General; its doors opened, and Hiramatsu's stretcher was rolled away. After a two minute wait, Toshi's came out. He was wheeled through a bewildering set of examinations, x-rays, and tests, then settled into a bed, plaster on his right forearm, and plastic bandaging on his ribs, mostly asleep. A nurse gave him a bed bath. He vaguely wondered who had given them his vital statistics, then realized they could have gotten his records from the police medical officer. He had certainly been asked few enough questions.

When Toshi woke the following morning, it was the usual hospital routine that greeted him. A nurse took his temperature and blood pressure, then brought him a tray. He finished breakfast, took his medicine, and relaxed back. Toshi had been rather embarrassed to discover his doctor's orders did not allow him up--a bedpan was offered instead. He also discovered that his right hip was too sore to move.

In the afternoon he was allowed to have visitors. Sousa came in first, by reason of rank. He and Toshi had a long discussion on current cases, sick forms, leave time, and Hiramatsu. At the end of it, Sousa promised to speak to the Commissioner on Toshi's ideas. Toshi, exhausted, looked up as a shadow fell in the doorway. His eyes lit up and a smile crossed his face.

"Hitomi!"

She came hesitantly into the room, her eyes haunted.

"Toshi?"

"It's all right, Hitomi. The doctor even said I might be out in four or five days. Don't worry."

"I--I'll try not to," Hitomi murmured. "But I was so scared..."

"I should have contacted you before I left," Toshi said contritely. "I'm really very sorry--"

"I still haven't forgiven that station for that newscast," Sousa growled.

Hitomi took Toshi's left hand, and they both looked at him. Sousa interpreted the puzzled look in Toshi's eyes and explained.

"The evening you were removed from the farmhouse, a Tokyo television news film crew was there--all day, evidently. They did a remarkable job covering the crisis, but they did a special on it, and ran it during prime time, without clearing it with us first. That, I'm afraid, is where Miss Kisugi first heard about the hostage situation..."

Toshi looked at Hitomi, who nodded. He squeezed her hand.

"I'm sorry, Hitomi! Going in was a spur-of-the-moment decision. If I'd thought about it, I'd've been too afraid to do it."

She smiled. "No, you wouldn't have. You're just fishing for compliments."

"Naw, I just wanted to see you smile. I'm sorry you found out about it like that, though, Hitomi, really."

"It's all right, Toshi. Everything came out well."

"Tell me, Captain: where's Daisuke Hiramatsu now?"

"In the prison wing under guard. He lost a good deal of blood, and they were picking splinters out of him for almost two and a half hours. Last I heard, he was inquiring as to your condition. Either that man's crafty beyond belief, or this is a complete about-face!"

"Not really, sir. He's getting what he really wanted."

"Revenge on you?" Hitomi asked, making private plans.

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing like that. He only wanted that because he couldn't see his daughter--and this crisis inadvertently arranged for that. So he gets to see her, after more than two years. He seemed a little ashamed of what he's been thinking of me. I feel sorry for him, Hitomi, and I want to help him."

"Hm!" Hitomi growled, looking rather dangerous.

"Really, Hitomi. It wasn't his fault, most of it. He went along with everyone until it was too late--his wife wanted money and social standing that goes with money, and she wanted it right away. Then he tried to defend his friends. He was tormented by missing his child, and that led him to strike out at me, as the only person he could blame enough to torment in return. But when he tried, when he actually thought about what he was doing, the thought made him sick."

"You can make your recommendations to the parole board," Sousa observed. He glanced at his watch. "I'd best be moving along. I have to do some work, so some people can lie around all day. You take it easy and get well, Utsumi! Good day, Miss Kisugi."

After he had gone, Hitomi kissed Toshi's forehead. "You look like you could use a nap, Toshi. I'll come back tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

His eyes slid closed, and he slept. Hitomi tiptoed out.



"--we can go camping again, and everything else, just like before, Yuki--but I'm afraid you'll have to wait a long, long time. I've done some pretty stupid things, and I'll have to pay for them. But your grandmother can bring you to visit sometimes, and we can write lots of letters, and maybe sometimes talk on the phone."

"I'll like that, Father," a shy young voice replied. "And I can wait. It doesn't matter. Grandmother says it will be a long time before I can leave the hospital--my teachers must come here. She wants the school to punish the children who were teasing me. I hope they do!"

"Revenge is wrong, Yuki. I found that out. Just punishment is one thing, but revenge is foolish. I tried to get revenge on a man who was only doing his job, and I know my sentence will be longer because of that."

Toshi leaned against the doorjamb of the hospital room where this conversation was taking place, a gleam in his eye. He walked with the aid of a cane, and his right wrist was suspended in a sling. He tried to keep his face straight, knowing that Hitomi, standing behind him, was also bubbling with glee.

"How long will it be before the hospital lets you out, Yuki?" he asked, hobbling slowly into the room.

The girl in the bed, her left leg in traction, looked over at him, struck dumb by a stranger now entering the conversation. Her father, in a wheelchair by the bed, a guard in attendance, looked sideways. He wore a hospital gown, and his leg was sticking out before him on the wheelchair rest, thoroughly bandaged. He was clean-shaven, his hair neatly combed.

"Officer Utsumi! Are they letting you out?"

"Yes, today. I was on my way to the front entrance when I heard you. Now I go on sick leave until this wrist heals. The doctor's reports on you are quite favorable. They tell me you'll be out in another three weeks or so. But how long will your daughter have to stay like this?"

"Almost four months," Hiramatsu said. "I'll miss these little talks when I have to go back. The guards and nurses have been very good to us. I'm brought here every day."

Toshi grinned, then. Widely. "They're excavating that period find of yours, you know. The Museum of Tokyo has funded an expedition--short of help, as always, so they say."

"My find?" Hiramatsu repeated, incredulous.

"Sure. Nobody can deny that you had the first contact with those items since they were sealed in. Your find--and it will be listed as such when they go on display."

Hiramatsu looked stunned. "That's--incredible! Why would they do a think like that?"

"Toshi tried to look innocent, and failed. "Well, I don't think you'll have much time for camping for a while--even if your daughter was up to it. The rural commander, Asuka, and I both spoke to your parole board yesterday, and they said that if you could come up with a reasonable plan for your life, you'd get parole within a month, considering the circumstances. Your mother-in-law wants you to come and live with her and your daughter--it'll be nice to have a man around to see to things, she says. And maybe she didn't give you a chance before. And, the Museum wants to hire you, even send you back to school to get your credentials, if you like."

"They want--she wants--you mean--"

Toshi grinned wickedly. "Your parole board says you can even be paroled straight out of here; presuming, of course, that you agree to this usurping of your life..."

"Huh! Agree? Why would I ever object, Utsumi? That's the most incredible thing I've ever heard! That's wonderful! I can't understand why you're willing to take the bother with me, after what I did to you."

"You had your reasons, and I respect them. You weren't yourself any more. After all, you could have done a lot worse to me."

"I almost did, and I'm ashamed of myself now."

"That's what I meant. You care."

"Come on, Toshi," Hitomi said firmly. "The doctor said you're going home, and to stay off that leg. That doesn't mean you can stand on it while you're still in the hospital!"

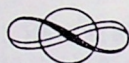
Toshi looked sheepish. "The parole board will be sending for you. They'll explain things further. And the head of the Museum will--"

"Toshi," Hitomi warned.

"Bye," Toshi said hurriedly, and allowed himself to be herded off to the sound of Hiramatsu's chuckling.

Hiramatsu stared after him in wonder, then chuckled again. "Come by the museum and visit sometimes!" he called after the departing policeman.

"Father, this means we can study together," Yuki piped up.



"I think that was a marvelous thing you did," Hitomi observed as a rather shaky Toshi maneuvered himself into her car.

"Well, he deserved a break," Toshi said defensively.

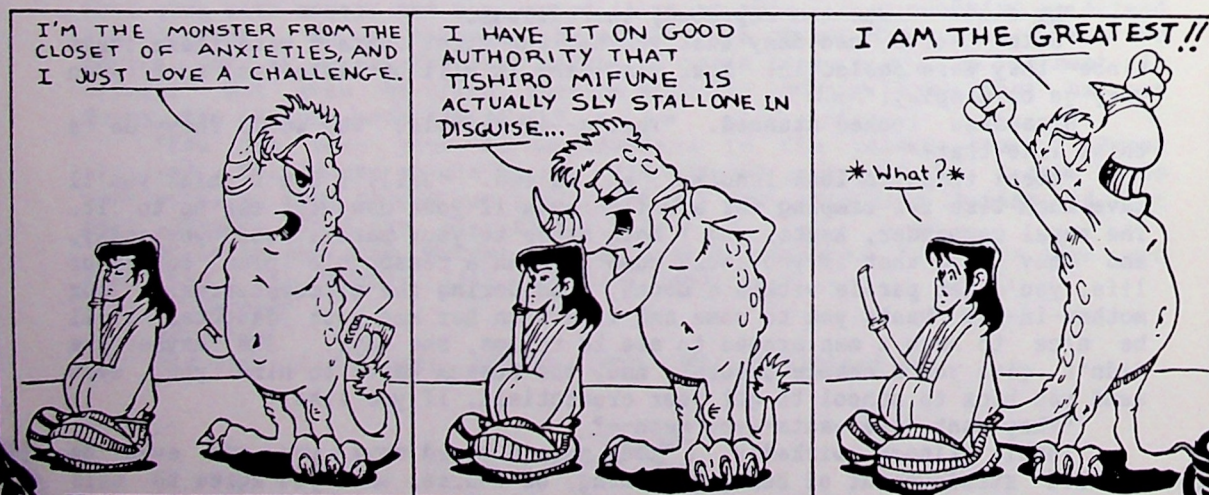
Hitomi shut the door, went around and got into the driver's seat. She turned an angelic face to her passenger, who braced himself for the worst.

"Why; because he already gave you yours?" she asked, tapping Toshi's wrist lightly.

The car's engine drowned the sound of his groan.

"Hitomi, that's terrible!"

end



Submissions Guidelines

The following guidelines apply to material submitted to any Anime House publication.

Fiction may be any length up to 40,000 words (longer by special arrangement). All stories must be independent and complete onto themselves. Please submit only full and finished stories for consideration, not fragments.

R-rated stories are welcome, so long as they emphasize erotic sensual and/or romantic elements rather than sex for its own sake (a judgment call on the part of the editors). Gay material is acceptable in our non-media related publications. In our media-related publications, we accept gay material when the characters involved were presented as gay in the original source (eg. Eroica or Patalliro!) or are original to the author. We will consider "Slash" material only under very unusual circumstances.

Manuscripts should be legible (typed is highly encouraged). Be sure to put your name and address on the first page. Send xeroxes only, not master copies. We also accept submissions in machine-readable form on IBM-PC format 5 1/4 inch floppy diskettes (pure-ASCII or Wordstar files). Inquire about other formats--we may be able to accommodate them. We will acknowledge receipt of all submissions, but if you want the manuscript returned, send a S.A.S.E., and be patient. Canada is a foreign country, and your postage stamps don't work up here, so we'll have to mail it back from the United States at the first opportunity.

When we accept a story, we'll do our best to catch the typos (and replace them with some of our own), spelling mistakes, and grammatical errors. Other changes, if required, will be discussed with the author. In any case, a copy of the edited manuscript will be returned to the author for review prior to publication.

Art (fillers, portfolios or illustrations) must be black-and-white, and either pen-and-ink or pen-and-ink plus letratone/ziptone shading (ie easily and crisply xerox-able). No pencil-work, please. We will not make any modifications to the art except possibly to reduce it in size. Once again, clear xeroxes or PMTs only. Don't send original artwork through the mail.

Anyone who has a full page or more of material printed in a zine will receive a copy of that issue free. Payment for articles or artwork of less than a page are negotiable.

The editors admit to being whimsical folks, so all submissions are judged, ultimately, on the basis of personal whimsy. If you have a story you feel deserves an exemption from one or more of the stated guidelines, by all means, tell us about it!

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Japanese Animation Fanzines

ANIME HOUSE PRESENTS #1: Mixed-world Japanese Animation zine (1989 FAN-Q winner)

Featuring:

EVERYONE EXCELLS AT SOMETHING (Gundam) by Karen Klinck. For teenaged military cadets Char Aznable and Garma Zabi, that "something" is the fine art of getting themselves in trouble.

BETWEEN WORLDS (SPT Layzner) by Marg Baskin. Half-human/half-alien, and outcast from both races, Eiji finds precarious sanctuary with a team of partisans fighting to free Earth from the alien Grados.

THE RESCUE (Eroica Yori Ai O Kometa) by Waylaid Mann. With enemy agents on his tail, Agent A isn't in a position to say "no" to any haven.

ACT OF CRUELTY (Gundam) by Steph Rendino. Garma is sixteen and studying for exams. Alone in the palace, he should be safe...

FOR ONE DAY'S RULE (Vampire Hunter D) by Julie Froelich. (1989 FAN-Q short story winner). Trapped, injured and beset by demons, Ray Ginsay thinks his situation can't get worse. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

ANGEL (Eroica Yori Ai O Kometa) by Kay Reynolds. Searching for the lost treasure of Alexander, the Major and Dorian are taken prisoner by mercenary Richard Cole. Dorian must take a terrible risk to protect the treasure--and save their lives.

ANIME HOUSE PRESENTS #1 contains artwork, poetry, original manga, and cartoons by Marg Baskin, Jeanette Eilke, Julie Froelich, Nei Mo Han, Lawrence Sufrin, Colleen Winters, and V.M. Wyman. It is 152 pages, xeroxed, and spiral bound.

ANIME HOUSE PRESENTS #2: Mixed world Japanese animation zine

Featuring:

ELECTRA'S SONG (Saint Seiya) by Susan Tull. Electra, former Saint of Ares, has defected to Athena. Ares sends an emissary to destroy the traitor: a man she will not fight.

THE MOLE'S HOLE (Patalliro) by Ron Miles. Bancoran is a traitor? Maraich must join forces with Patalliro to find his missing lover and discover the truth.

GUARDIAN DEAR (XX Gundam) by Steph Rendino. The ghost of Garma Zabi haunts Hamaan Kaan's palace. His existence is aimless until a meeting with his niece, Mineba, provides the restless spirit with new purpose.

IN HIS DEBT (Urashiman) by Karen Klinck. A misfired trap imprisons Claude and Rudobihhi beneath the ruins of an abandoned tenement. When personal survival forces a truce between enemies, can things ever be the same as they were before?

ICARUS ALSO BURNED (Saint Seiya) by Nei Mo Han. Marin turns to gold Saint Leo-Aoiria for help in rescuing her pupil, Seiya. But when the rescue's over, the real story begins.

THOUGHTS CONTINGENT ON THE TOTALLY RAD (Lupin III) by V.M. Wyman. Since he's worked with Lupin III, Goemon Ishikawa has been forced to play many roles. But Goemon as a rock singer? Dressed in leather? With his hair dyed blue? Naahhh. It couldn't happen....

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GUNS AND RED ROSES: A fanzine for From Eroica. With Love

SOMEONE IS KILLING THE GREAT NATO AGENTS OF EUROPE by Neil Mo Han. It began as a straightforward mission. But then everything goes awry, leaving the Major fighting for survival and Dorian facing one of the most difficult moments of his life.

MASQUE FOR THREE by Barbara Tennison. When the Major accepts an invitation from Sophie Wolf to join her in Athens, he vows to relax. Then Eroica arrives on the scene.

A PIECE OF TAIL by Janice Hornyak. Dorian witnesses the Major's capture by K.G.B. agents, and sets about arranging a rescue. The biggest hurdle may be talking the Major into the pink bunny suit....

SITUATION NORMAL... by JoLynn Horvath. Waiting for an airplane at London's Heathrow airport, Dorian fights boredom by helping himself to some trinkets belonging to his fellow travelers. It's only when the shooting starts that he realizes one of those trinkets could cost him his life.

DIAMOND by Karen Klinck. After M.I.6 agent Jack Bancoran arrests the Earl of Red Gloria as the prime suspect in a diamond heist, both the Earl and Maraich vanish. An Eroica/Patalliro! crossover story.

GUNS AND RED ROSES also contains background information on Eroica and other Yasuko Aoi manga; plus artwork, original manga and cartoons by Cyrissa Adamson, Pat Cash, Larry DeSouza, Neil Mo Han, April Lee, Bonnie Reitz, Colleen Winters, and V.M. Wyman. It is 176 pages, xeroxed, spiral bound with a full-colour cover by FAN-Q award winning artist Neil Mo Han.

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GUNS AND RED ROSES is published by Anime House Press

PIECES OF 88: A Fanzine for Area 88, edited and published by Steph Rendino

Featuring:

GROUNDUP by Dale Pettit. When a sandstorm keeps the mercenaries indoors, Shin, Saki and Mickey commiserate on their reasons for continuing the fight.

A CASE OF SECTION 88 by Steph Rendino. Shin's been watching the Transformers and comes up with the stupidest idea for escape yet.

WORKING OFF STEAM by Dale Pettit. All Prince Saki wants is a quiet drink in a London bar. Sadly, he's in the wrong Japanimation universe.

REFLECTIONS WITHIN FOUR WALLS by Neil Mo Han. Confined in a cell after trying to kill Saki, Shin meditates on the man he has become.

IN A DRY AND WATERLESS PLACE by Steph Rendino. Greg's friendship with two young pilots is challenged by the prejudices of the other pilots.

SECRET ORIGIN STORY by Steph Rendino & Dianne Rodman. Superman's got one, Batman's got one, now McCoy does too! Everybody's got to start somewhere...

A KIND OF HOMECOMING by Steph Rendino. (1989 FAN-Q short story nominee) Tormented by guilt and nightmares, Saki decides to resign as base commander. The base is given a martinet as its new commander and Mickey takes it on himself to convince Saki to return.

PIECES OF 88 also contains artwork by Neil Mo Han and Pat Munson-Siter. It is 47 pages, xeroxed.

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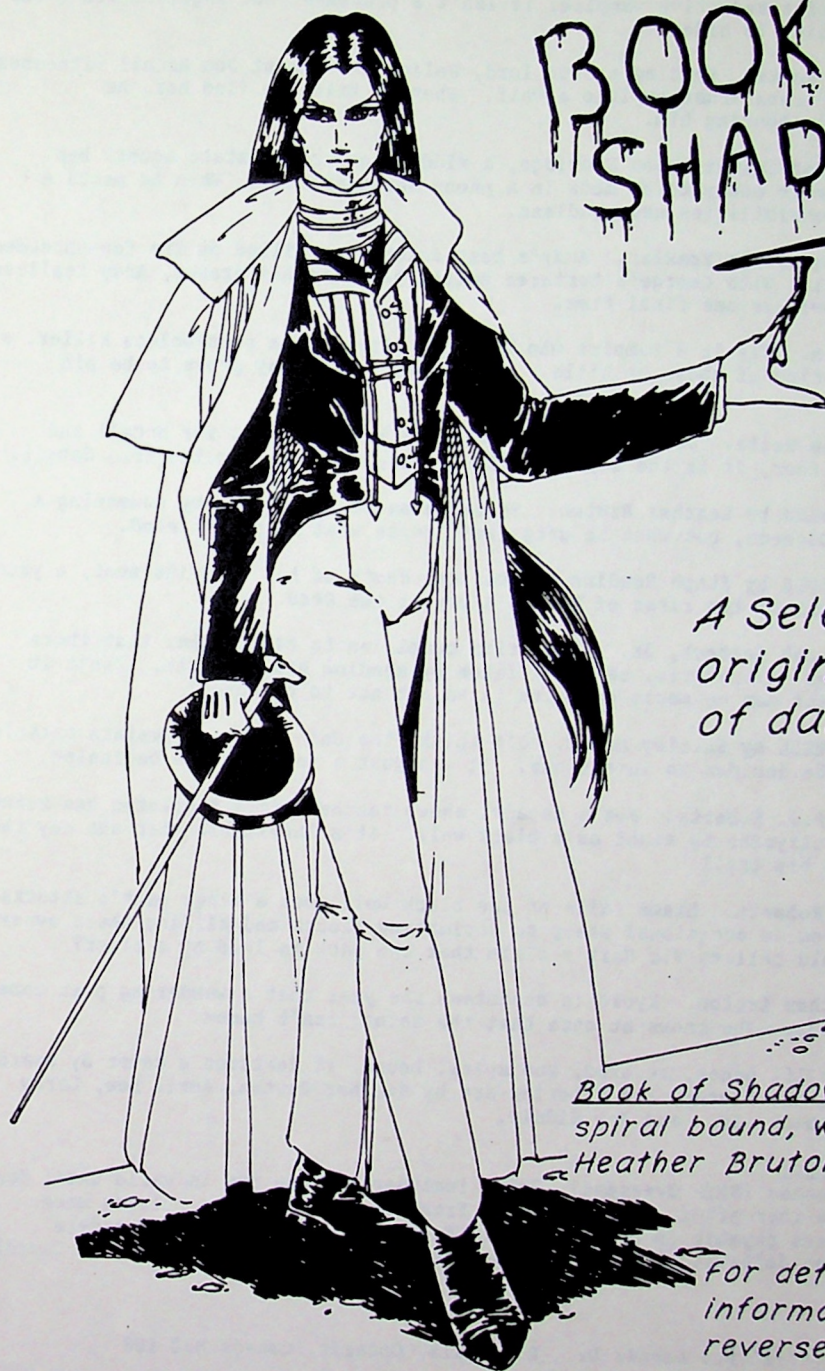
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